GOLDEN TIME

ゴールデンタイム

春にしてブラックアウト

1

竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト・駒都えーじ

電撃文庫

ゴールデンタイム
GOLDEN TIME

1

春にしてブラックアウト

竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト●駒都えーじ
デザイン●ビィピィ

CAST

多田万里 …… 主人公。上京してきた大学一年生。

加賀香子 …… お嬢様。超完璧。
いや、ほぼ完璧。だいたい完璧。……多分完璧。

柳澤光央 …… 万里の友達。通称やなっさん。

林田奈々 …… 二年の先輩。通称リンダ。

岡千波 …… ほっこりラブリーな森ガール。XSサイズ。

二次元くん …… 三次元に絶望した男。本名佐藤。

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GOLDEN TIME
春にしてブラックアウト

KOUKO KAGA
加賀香子
CHINAMI OKA
岡 千波
MITSUO YANAGISAWA
柳澤光央
DAIKI TADA
多田万里
NANA SENDAI
NANA先輩
LINDA
林田奈々

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1

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竹宮ゆゆこ

イラスト●駒都えーじ

Golden Time

Volume 1

~A Blackout in Spring~

Written by:

Takemiya Yuyuko

Illustrations by:

Komatsu Eeji

Hosted by:

Baka Tsuki

Translator:

rpapo

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Prologue

"Kuwaa~n... aanaan iya aaaaan... ufuu~n...," as the usual, strangely erotic sound of the idiotic bell could be heard behind him, Banri was already halfway across the bridge, at the head of the group.

"Sorry, are we going too fast today?"

He turned to look back at the club's vice-captain, who had been running just behind him.

"Yeah, let's go a little slower."

While pulling out the pony-tail, which had fallen into the jersey's collar, the vice-captain turned around too, and looked back at the other club members, who were running behind them.

If they went at their normal pace, the seductive bell could be heard when they were one quarter over the long bridge. The club manager, Kanada-san, followed the end of the line on his bicycle, where he kept an eye on the first year students (who weren't all that strong yet) so they wouldn't get left behind, and rang the bell, which was about half-way through their normal forty minute run.

"That bee---llll---,"

"Haaasss beeenn ruuunnng by..."

"Kana~~~da~~~~!" ...Holding imaginary microphones in their left hands and waving their right fists to a R&B rhythm, Banri and the vice-captain sang out in chorus. "Upperclassmen are idiots!", a second-year student running up after them gazed upon the two with disapproval. Another of the second-years said, "Don't they do that every day?", with a stunned look on his face. No matter how uncool it was, or how tired the juniors got of it, they couldn't do anything about it. Looking at the vice-captain, Banri said, "Nothing wrong, is there?" Playing along with him, the vice-captain replied, "Right," and nodded.

Banri and the other track club members ran this bridge every day, what was said to be Japan's longest wooden bridge. Even as a local, he thought the same: it was certainly long. A big river separated this side (the mountains) from that side (the sea), which could be sensed in the hazy distance. Especially now, the scenery was blurred by the dusty spring wind and, somehow trembling, looked even more distant. Because the bridge was so long, ten years ago, a travel program had featured it on their show.

Next thing you know, there was a bridge boom! City Hall climbed on board this expected fad, saying, "Let's make sure we please the tourists that will surely descend upon us!" They had

interminable meetings upon worse meetings, and in the end, on the mountain side of the bridge, they set up statues of the "Seven Gods of Fortune" The child-sized statues were arranged along a fairly sloping mountain trail, making an easy hiking course. Just before the grove of trees was cut off by the bridge at the end of the trail, above Fukurokuju, a huge bell was hung, with its sound bringing good fortune to the opposite bank. Practically saying "Please sound the bell", a mallet was placed beside it. The fact that the bell's toll reverberated in a strangely sensual way they decided to leave be: "Well, there's nothing you can do about it."

However, the few tourists that came were busy taking pictures of the view from the bridge, and consequently the only visitors to the statues were either the neighborhood dogs on walks, or the local high-school track team training. The dogs, of course, couldn't ring the bell. The only person who would make the perverted noise by ringing the bell was Kanada.

"Huh? What happened to that guy?"

Banri spotted someone, after he eased off on his pace, and turned back around. Surprised, the vice-captain asked, "Eh? What?"

"Look, there... Maybe he is not feeling well? Is he alright?"

On the bridge itself, a little further ahead of Banri's group, a man wearing a khaki jacket was crouched down. He was clinging to the knee-high guardrail as if he could hardly hold himself up. Banri glanced sidelong at the guy, but hesitated to call out to him, instead slowly approaching, quietly said to himself,

"I've got a bad feeling about this..."

That very moment, he passed by.

Their eyes met sidelong, quietly.

The man crouched down as if blind drunk, or maybe crying, or perhaps suddenly fallen ill, covered his face with both hands and looked at Banri through a gap between his fingers. On the back of his hand, a single mysterious character, something like a "wa" or a "re", was gleaming with a faint yellow light that Banri noticed because it flickered. He didn't understand its meaning, but leaving that aside, the man's eyes were opened wide in surprise.

Startled, because the area of the man's half-hidden nose had a strange...

"Uo, o!"

Because he was looking way over to the side for too long, he lost his balance and stumbled a few steps. He really didn't want to be seen like that.

"Banri!"

Calling out his name, the vice-captain sounded surprised, too. As if it were to blame, the elbow of Banri's windbreaker was nudged.

"That’s dangerous! What’re you doing?"

"But, but something about that guy… what!? No way!?"

Stubbornly, Banri was already running backwards, blinking while searching for the person he must have just passed.

He may have been seeing things, or it may have been a waking dream.

However many times he looked back, the unfortunate phantom was now nowhere to be found. He suddenly wasn’t there. He had simply disappeared.

Was it entirely his imagination? Was it a hallucination? No, or maybe, no way… did he fall off the bridge?

But he couldn’t hear the sound of anything dropping into the water.

Chapter 1

Tada Banri ran half crying.

The Tokyo streets at one o'clock in the morning, despite being "the Tokyo", were pitch dark with no signs of life, not even a lit light by a window. During the day today (or rather, yesterday already), in spite of it only being April, it had been so warm he had been wearing only a T-shirt and drinking iced coffee, muttering to himself "It must be global warming." He was now shivering from the cold and anxiety. The sleeves of his flannel hoodie pulled down to his fingertips, his too-unsteady footsteps making a flapping sound from the sandals on his bare feet, anyhow, if he could just get to the main street everything might be all right... Should be all right. He wanted it to happen. With all his heart he ran.

"A young man turning nineteen this year shouldn't be running through the streets at night teary eyed...", I thought, but I understood Banri's feelings.

If I were in the same situation, I might cry too.

He had come to the capital together with his mother who, for the sake of her son who was starting a life alone, had arranged for furniture, appliances, gas, water, electricity and so on. She'd gotten through various minor formalities here and there, and then this afternoon (already, so fast!) she'd returned home in a Hikari bullet train.

And then, finally, he had truly started the first night of his life alone. Only, this night kept him from tomorrow morning's college entrance ceremony. Late at night, as the new day was just starting, unable to sleep with his worries, he did as he supposed any resident of Tokyo would do in order to distract himself: he went from one convenience store to another... but he lost his way in the streets. Worse, it appeared that somewhere, somehow, he had lost the key to his new home. In any case, it wasn't there in his pocket anymore.

Banri's feet suddenly stopped and walked all of three steps back the way he'd come. He saw a map of the residential area standing by the edge of the sidewalk. "Saved", he said to himself as he approached and searched for the apartment building where he now lived, "Motomachi", tracing a route with his finger from "You are here". Anyway, once he had returned to the front of the apartment building, he intended to walk all the way back to the convenience store, searching for his keys.

But... ahh, enough.

If this voice could reach Banri, I would tell him, "Look more carefully at the map. That 'Motomachi' is the 'Motomachi' in the next district!'" No, rather I would say, "You left them in the apartment in the first place, forgetting to lock up! They're in the room!" Unfortunately, I cannot do that.

For the time being, all I can do is pray for him so that if Banri could just get back to the apartment somehow and get to sleep quickly, then perhaps he would survive tomorrow's entrance ceremony without problems. Just how important can one day in your life be, this new

college student entrance ceremony? Even I--- though having become a wandering soul, can understand.

I couldn't believe the possibility that the spirits of men, even when they have left their bodies, remain and stay in this world to watch over someone. This side of the world was hidden, so I had only recently found out.

I am, so to speak, a ghost.

My name was once Tada Banri.

Nobody hears this voice anymore, nobody notices my existence.

I just keep watching this new Tada Banri who continues to live, even though I, his spirit, have fallen out of him.

"Young man, at this hour what---, what happened---"

All of a sudden, the living Tada Banri turned his face forward and a light shone straight in his eyes, freezing him like a deer in a car's headlights.

"Ah, wha... I, I got lost..."

"Do you have a license, a passport, anything with you that can prove who you are?"

"Eh, ah, huh..."

He was being subjected to the first police interrogation of his life. This was going to be a long night. Was this situation a crisis? Was it a gift from god? You can never tell where Banri is concerned.

* * *

Anything and everything thrown together, his current state of affairs was one of "Great Trepidations", thought Banri as he looked around.

The weather, however, was truly excellent.

A snowstorm of cherry blossom petals from the clear blue sky danced around frantically, as they wanted to spend their lives as spectacularly as possible. The auditorium, located amongst a number of old gray office buildings, seemed to welcome the moment of drama.

The scene looked like something from a painting. Cherry blossoms against an April sky. Young people gathering for opening ceremonies. Men and women alike wearing brand new suits and leather shoes, bright smiles breaking out all over the place, anticipating college life. Banri felt like trying to cut off the dark, inconspicuous corner of that painting, where he stood.

A constant stream of friendly conversations passed before his eyes. The auditorium entrance was beneath the eaves of the building. For the moment, Banri and everybody else had the same brand new suits and the same brand new leather shoes, in their hands they had envelopes with the names of their colleges. With dark circles beneath his eyes from lack of sleep, he didn't look the typical freshman. His right sideburn curled out at a strange angle and some of the hairs near his ear stuck inside, rustling around, bothering him.

He couldn't get to sleep until three in the morning. He'd been a wreck since last night.

He got the idea, in the dead of the night, to go out and buy something, got lost in the streets of an unfamiliar neighborhood (a rather dumb thing to do), took time away from a policeman's duties, explained his situation and was escorted back to his apartment, with great difficulty he got to sleep, but due to his nerves, he woke up at six in the morning. But it was better than sleeping in late, he thought, as he slowly laid out his clothes while he thawed some rice his mother had put in the freezer, then ate breakfast. After that he took a shower, and dried off his hair while sitting on the bed. He shouldn't have done that. His body heated up by the shower, the still brand-new sheets comfortably cool, he had lain down without intending to. He didn't remember closing his eyes. "Eh... What'd I do now... What the heck...", he said when he realized it was already past nine o'clock. The opening ceremony was to start at ten in the morning.

Jerked awake like a puppet, he fell into a state of panic as he looked in the mirror, his newly washed hair now a mess from having slept on it, but he didn't have enough time to wash it again. He cheated with the dryer as much as he could, threw on a suit and flew out of the apartment. In that moment, he was even more on the verge of crying. He got on two trains later than he should have by the schedule, the right shoes on, but the wrong socks. Without even realizing it, he had put on his customary ankle-baring sneaker socks. Indeed, with his stiff new shoes, when he sat, he felt a weird chill around his ankles. He felt helpless.

He dashed from the station, somehow or another arriving at the college entrance ceremony on time. Taking his seat, he composed himself like a perfect freshman while the visitors were welcomed, though he found himself disassociated from the grand occasion. That wasn't from lack of sleep, nor from bedhead.

It was because, he realized, he was the only one entirely alone.

He wasn't even trying to be observant: the place was noisy the whole time from people talking. It was because everybody else had somebody to talk to. If they'd come up from an affiliated high school, they'd already formed groups of friends, guys and girls together, and if not, they were usually seated with their parents. Usually.

"Parents these days don't go to college entrance ceremonies!" "That may be so at Toudai, but at this place that's overdoing it. Everybody's going to think I'm some sort of mama's boy!" "Absolutely ridiculous!" "Parents don't normally come to college entrance ceremonies!" After Banri's complaints, his mother had returned home the day before. "Well, I've brought this just in case...", she said, then put a companion ticket for the admission ceremony back into her wallet, like it was something precious. He hadn't been all that seriously wishing for her not to come. But then he whined absurdly like a little kid, "I don't want you to come", in what he thought was a normal parent-child relationship.

And now, having gotten here, already discouraged, but above all, feeling guilty of being disloyal to his parents. It weighed heavily on him. He hadn't even waved. His mother's back had gone through the Yaesu north enntrance ticket gate, disappearing as he saw her off.

Without realizing it, he sighed pathetically as he stood still in the entrance, seeing the hair of people descending the steps, laughing together.

From where he stood, he could not see anybody else who was alone. He rubbed his eyes with his middle fingers. Maybe it was pollen, or perhaps lack of sleep, but his eyes were itching strangely. A guy who forgot his handkerchief certainly wouldn't have brought eyedrops with him either.

Things aren't looking good--- yeah, even as early as today, it looked like things are going to keep on going badly.

"You gonna ride the train? Or walk?"

"Why bother going up to the station? It just makes me tired. I prefer to walk."

In front of the paralyzed Banri's eyes, two guys walked by in suits, loosening their neckties.

From the auditorium, he had to make it over to the freshman orientation by himself, one hour later over on his department's part of campus. Having said that, according to the guide map that had been passed out to them, it was only one station away by subway. Even though he had just arrived in the capitol, that didn't mean he'd just crept in from the wilderness, nor that he was all that nervous about what he had to do. What was confusing from Banri's point of view was that the crowd leaving the auditorium, for some reason, was dividing in two.

Perhaps, the people turning north were going to the station. Those going south were walking. With the weather so nice, he wanted to walk, but the walking route wasn't noted on the map. The memory of last night's disaster still fresh in his mind, he didn't want to get lost by himself again in the streets. "But from now on, I will have to find the way everywhere by myself..." "But still..." Banri stood there murmuring, still hesitating for a while, then he finally made up his mind and went down the steps to the street.

He decided to stick close to the pair, who preferred to walk. "From this point on we're a trio!",

he whispered to the backs of the two in front of him. The two of them were dressed in slim dark grey suits, just like Banri.

Still lacking the courage to make conversation, Banri followed after them, matching their pace. Though things were a bit uncomfortable right now, eventually their classes and studies would draw them together as friends. He'd say things like "Honestly, at the opening ceremony I was hopelessly following you two", and then they would be able to laugh about it all. Banri's pursuit still unnoticed, the two walked on steadily. At length the entire crowd of freshmen had flowed out of the auditorium, into the streets, where, like a river coming together, they mixed into the crowds of the weekday town passing by. If you didn't look too close, you could wind up confusing the freshmen and the businessmen. When,

"Ah, it's rather hot today, isn't it? Let's go get some ice cream."

"Really?"

The right-hand guy spoke on a whim. Staring at the back of the guy's head, Banri's eyebrows rose without thinking.

"Really. Why don't we stop by the next convenience store? I'll eat ice cream."

Do you really want to eat some ice cream right now? The opening ceremony has just ended, and you want ice cream from a convenience store in the middle of the way to the orientation, when the time is limited? He gazed the back of the left guy's head. "Forget it." You on the left, say it! Just what he was going to do while those guys ate ice cream, he had no idea.

"In that case I'll have some too. There ought to be a 7-11 around here somewhere."

"Yeah, there was a 7-11. But where was it, I wonder?"

They didn't hear Banri's silent message. Leaving the slow stream of passersby, the two turned down a narrow side street. This was the time when he should have bidden farewell to them, sticking to the other freshmen. Banri should have done that, but he suffered a lapse in judgment. Going along straight ahead, it wasn't easy to distinguish freshmen from businessmen right away, so without thinking he had gone along with the two down the side street. "Ah ah ah." Ignoring Banri, whose conscience tried quietly to hurry him, those two were saying things like, "Hmm, 7-11, 7-11. Over there? Over here?" Those two stayed cool and collected as they went along unfamiliar streets. Perhaps they wanted to get rid of him... among such doubts, he turned left and right, straying from the right way,

"Ah, it wasn't a 7-11 after all."

They were in front of a Family Mart.

The two of them entered the store without hesitation, not noticing Banri's presence yet, who stood there blinking his eyes rapidly from anxiety. Not knowing what else to do, he followed

suit, leaving a little distance between them. He turned his back to them, pretending to stare at the magazines, while the two were fishing in the ice-cream case. After some ten seconds, he made up his mind, "I'll have to eat too." In order to look normal, he figured he ought to just do the same things those guys were doing. After looking sidelong to make sure the two guys had gone to the cash register ice-cream in their hands, putting on his most innocent expression, he peered into the ice-cream case too. Not to waste any time in choosing, he grabbed the first one at hand, "Ah... I'd like some ice cream after all..." making such a face while the two paid their bill, he queued behind them at the register. However,

"But of course, from here we've got orientation, and ice cream could be a real mess. We don't really have much time left, maybe we should change our mind."

"Well, that may be so. Shall we just go? Excuse me sir, the register is yours, we're leaving."

"Ehh!?"

The two very politely gave their turn in line to Banri and went to put the ice-creams back in their case. The part-time store-clerk wasn't even bothered. "Next please", he said, waving Banri forward. Not having any idea what else to do, he reluctantly handed over the ice-cream, got out his wallet, and lacking small change, finally got out a 10,000 yen bill. "First the larger change", five-thousand, six-thousand, seven-thousand. "Then the small", jingle jingle jingle. Getting back his change took long, and during that time, the two left the store.

---What the heck? What am I supposed to do?

Shocked stiff, saying "no thanks" for a bag, he took the ice-cream as it was, and while putting away his wallet, Banri left the store in a daze. "Which way did those two turn?", he couldn't spot the forms of the two guys. "Calm down for now, I'm not lost yet", he kept reminding himself. "We came from this way, and then perhaps, along that way. I know that much, no problem."

When he looked at it, he realized what he bought was a Gari-Gari-Kun. Whatever, let's eat. I should only worry after that. Banri shook his head to clear his panicky mind, then unwrapped his ice-cream. The soda-colored bar was tough from being too frozen, so after biting into it, "I have to put off eating this", he realized.

He took a looong breath.

"...What's this? ...What am I doing..."

What an idiot.

By the time he had realized it, the likely-to-be-important orientation was within thirty minutes or so. With no idea where he was, he was eating his ice-cream alone in front of the convenience store. The form of an idiot, who fell into this too unreasonable situation was reflected in the mirror mounted on the ID-picture machine across the street from the store.

He wore a dark grey suit, with a large light-green envelope. He held a light blue popsicle in hand. The hair drooping over his ruddy cheeks, was lighter than expected. Nonetheless, biting into the ice-cream, the features themselves looked much more composed than how he had previously perceived them. Even at a time like this, "Wow. If I look at myself objectively, I'm quite..." Banri thought, putting his hand on his chin, but

"...Whaa?"

He noticed that the image in the mirror wasn't moving together with him. Like a fool exposed, he turned around.

What was reflected in the photo-ID machine's mirror wasn't himself.

Dressed in a similarly colored suit, holding the same envelope at his side and eating the same ice cream was another person. Their eyes met, then looked away momentarily. Even so, Banri raised his eyes again and looked at the guy doing exactly the same as himself. There was no other possibility, the guy was a freshman at the same college. Ignoring him would be unnatural. Ehh, aren't we doing the same thing? Ah, what, maybe we are from the same university? By saying this, he wanted to keep things lighthearted,

"...Huh? Ah? Oo're ya?"

His mouth wasn't working too well, chilled by the ice-cream, and only an ambiguous moan was getting out.

Nonetheless, with body language, pointing at himself and then the other guy, he managed to get the point across,

"Ho...gu..."

The guy, too, while desperately trying to swallow a big mouthful of ice-cream, was looking back at Banri's face. Holding his fingertip to his mouth and chewing,

"...Well..., actually, I... the way to the college, I don't know it very well..."

His voice was lower than expected from his looks.

Without thinking, Banri gave a good long look at the other's face. Though it was just a for moment, mistaking the guy for himself was completely inexcusable, as the guy had much more composed features. He was also a bit taller than Banri, his hair better kept, his suit fit his strong shoulders well.

"I figured I would follow after somebody, so that's why I wound up walking right behind you. ...And when you went in there, I thought, 'What am I going to do now? ...Well, why not?... Why not just stick together?'"

"And from there..." the guy waved his ice-cream bar, showing it off.

Without thinking, Banri laughed. "What!?", he said, his voice now coming out naturally and brightly.

"Then really, we were doing exactly the same thing, both of us. I don't know the way either, and I followed after other guys from the auditorium `til I got here! But having been left behind, 'What am I going to do?', I was thinking."

"...Huh? Really?"

"Really. I don't know the way at all."

Still holding their ice-cream, not knowing what to do with it, they looked at each other for several seconds. In the end, they wound up laughing once more. Weren't they just the pair of oddballs? They felt like a heavy lid that was stuffed into their stomach, was swept away by laughing.

"Somehow, an unexpected meeting of similar people. I'm Tada Banri. 'Tada' means 'many fields', and though my name is made up from 'Man' and 'ri', it isn't 'Manri', but rather 'Banri'. I'm studying law. You can call me Banri."

"Oh good, I'll be studying law too. I'm Yanagisawa Mitsuo. It means that 'the willows are thick by the side of the swamp', and 'light in the center'. You don't have to be formal with me, 'Yana' will do. Did you come here straight from high school?"

"I'm one year late in starting. How about you, *Yana*-ssan?"

"*Yana*-ssan? Wait- a year older!? ...Really? You don't look like it--- Well, it's fine. I'm straight from high school... but, though, ah, is it OK if I speak casually like this?"

"Of course. I mean, you don't even have to ask."

"I'm from Shizuoka. Since last night I live by myself. Where ya from?"

"I live close to here, but alone too."

"Yeah, freedom! We're alike! Let's be friends!"

As if raising a toast, Banri raised his half-eaten Gari-Gari-Kun to the level of his eyes. Yanagisawa raised his too the same way, and then they both finished off their treats in one breath. Throwing away the sticks, off they went, and finally before long they were able to return to the main street.

By themselves, after all, it had seemed an arduous journey, but together they weren't all that concerned. Compared to the streets of the residential area with no living soul around late at

night, this time they could just ask somebody. When he was by himself, he couldn't even imagine doing that.

Chuckling to himself, he gave a sidelong glance at the already overly familiar Yanagisawa.

"Because unfortunately there wasn't anybody to talk with until now, I'd really been rather worried. I saw that other people were already among friends, and my loneliness was just getting worse."

"Ah, I was thinking that too. Especially for me, feelings of being cast out are something I didn't have for a long time now: since elementary school I've being going to an affiliated school."

"You've been going to an affiliated school since elementary?"

Nodding, Yanagisawa rapidly muttered the name of his place. Even though Banri was not from Tokyo, he still recognized the name of the prestigious private school. Over the next four years, the two of them would be attending this private university, but that other school was higher in rank in every possible way.

"Wha? Really? How come you didn't just advance to the university!? If you just stay on the escalator it always works out... What am I saying? Did I just..."

Banri reflexively shut up, stopping himself from running off at the mouth. This is wrong. What a fool he was. He was being insensitive. Maybe it wasn't he *didn't*, but that *couldn't* advance. Suddenly being raised from the depths of solitude, his excitement was slipping out of his control.

"Ex, excuse me...! What I said was wrong... I'm really sorry, we had such a great start on this day... Ah, the mood is becoming awfully strange..."

All these apologies were depressing. Looking at Banri's face, who held his mouth shut this time, his eyes wandering aimlessly,

"By no means, I don't mind at all. Well, if I tell it, it's going to be a long story."

Yanagisawa waved one of his hands in front of his fine shaped chin. His gesture of "Let's talk this over slowly some other time", reached Banri as well. "Slowly, some other time." I'll tell you when we have more time. By all means, come over for a visit, OK? You can even have Bubuzuke. ---Ah!

Slooowly he took one step away from Yanagisawa. "Eh, what?", Yanagisawa looked at Banri's strangely fixed smile, who looked like a fool.

Banri was thinking he'd gone and done it. Last night, before getting lost in the neighborhood, he'd been looking on the net. Amongst tips for college students posted on a site, there was a human-relations item: 'Pay special attention to avoid overly familiarity on first meeting! There are possible landmines!' ...What should he do in a situation where he was the one requiring

special attention? Unable to help himself, he slapped himself once on the head like a comic story teller.

"I'm such an idiot, an idiot landmine... to have caused *Yana*-ssan such unpleasant feelings, after he's taken so much trouble to become my friend..."

"Huh? What's up? Are you perhaps troubled about what just happened? It's not that big a deal. It's not a long dragged out story, ...well, it seems you are worried for some unknown reason, so I will explain it in short. I had caused some problems concerning the opposite sex at the affiliated school. I was fed up, and needed my space. I wanted a new life as a college student, so I took the outside exam on my own will."

"It's not such a big deal, really", expressed Yanagisawa as he scratched his prominent eyebrows. Upon considering it,

"...Hyuuu...!"

Banri couldn't whistle, so he said this instead.

Carefully coming halfway back to where he was before, folding his arms across his chest, waving his finger while his shoulders shook, he intended to express "You're great!" the best way he could, within the limits of what was acceptable.

"Huh... The opposite sex?"

...If he kept his excitement at this level, then there shouldn't be any problems. But, in truth Banri wanted to be even more fired up. *The opposite sex!? How cool! Arguing with the girls is super cool! A love triangle!? An affair!? Forbidden love!? Let me hear about it! I mean, share your luck! Make some girl trouble! Get that power-up! Super jump!* ...Around his heart a tension was mounting,

"Sooo, if someone's as cool as *Yana*-ssan, such things happen to them!? So did you have an argument with your girlfriend? Eh, eh, am I getting annoying!?"

He stopped right there.

"...No, you're not."

"Don't go making up stuff!"

With a fast half-step, he had drawn right next to Yanagisawa.

"...No, but, its no case talking about it. And by the way... she's not my girlfriend."

"Not your.. girlfriend!? What did you just say!?"

Isn't? And, while allowing Banri to get closer, the strangely serious Yanagisawa nodded. Then,

"It was not a good thing, absolutely not. It was... right. So to speak,"

Stopped by a red light at a crosswalk, he looked a little into the distance and then turned back to Banri.

"...a disaster..., it seemed like."

"Even so what does that," he tried to find out more, and as luck would have it, at that moment the light changed to green.

On this side of the crosswalk, a taxi was parked. Banri, with Yanagisawa alongside, had just started crossing in front of it at the light. *Wham!* The taxi's door flew open. To the asphalt descended the spike of a high-heel shoe, the hard sound echoing like a hammer.

They looked over there by reflex.

Banri gasped. In an instant, all his thoughts were swept away.

The storm of cherry blossoms had been something to see, but this, this was overwhelming.

Almost like rushing forth, out of the taxi came a huge bouquet of scarlet roses. Shining in violent contrast to the deep blue sky, deep deep deep red.

Banri's gaze was torn towards it, as it was raised overhead diagonally by that person.

"...Whop!?"

With all her strength, she struck the side of his face. "It hurts!", he shouted out, "No! It's cold!", he shouted out again, but in the end he hadn't any voice.

A cold spray of water droplets splashed over everything nearby. Completely astonished, Banri fell to the ground. The rear of his brand new suit-pants hit the ground, and he watched as more glittering drops of sprayed water came flying. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It was Yanagisawa, who was being attacked. Yanagisawa got slapped across the face from above and the sides, three times, four times, by a bouquet of fresh, deep red roses. Each time, a few of the lively flower petals fluttered away, falling like drops of blood.

And then, the finishing blow! From directly overhead the bouquet came down, thrown down on the collapsed Yanagisawa's chest.

Banri was speechless.

Yanagisawa was too.

The rose petals fluttered about vividly, overloading their senses with the intensely sweet smell of nectar. In the middle of this deep red air raid,

"...I've removed the thorns."

Showing a wide, "perfect" smile, even the breathing was calm of that woman.

Who she was, what she was, such questions were fading away like the fog in the morning. There she was, a luminous snow white form, sparkling as if gently sprinkled with drops of water --- the deep red flower petals as it were an aura about her, the queen of roses completely.

"Congratulations on your admission! That's all I wanted to say."

"This can't be", Yanagisawa groaned in a low voice, holding the roses in his arms. Like he didn't want to accept reality, he was shaking his head left and right. Banri, still the dumbfounded outsider, simply lifted his eyes to her smile.

Her skin was perfect, shining like the finest silk. Her hair was perfect, deep brown, curled without a strand out of place. Her figure was perfect, her head slightly tilted to the side. Wearing a snow-white one-piece lace dress, her neck and ears highlighted by pearls, with fine high-heeled shoes and a deep purple handbag at her wrist, in every way the woman was perfect. That such a person could even live and breathe was a complete mystery, she was so unrealistically perfect. Even her voice was as clear as tinkling bells.

"So silly of you, Mitsuo."

Suddenly intense, she looked down fixedly at Yanagisawa from under her long, thick eyelashes. Her lips shining the same deep and glossy red as the roses, just like flower petals, she continued smiling perfectly.

"Did you think you could fool me completely, sneaking off to college? Did you seriously think you could escape? There's just no way. You can't fool me with tricks like that. For Mitsuo to run away from my perfect, our perfect future, such a thing cannot be."

Mitsuo - - - She is calling my *Yana*-ssan, no, not that he is mine in any way, Yanagisawa by his name.

Still dumbfounded and planted on the ground, their earlier conversation came to Banri's mind. This could be the trouble-making girl who is not his girlfriend, perhaps, after all.

"Mitsuo has been mine for-eeever."

"Wr...wroooongg!"

"You're mine. Don't put up useless resistance ever again. So, see you later!"

She half ran back over to the taxi, which was still parked there. Just before getting in, she noticed a flower petal stuck to her hair. She picked it gently with her fingertip and put it in the palm of her hand, then blew it this way --- I mean towards Yanagisawa, like a kiss. The petal fluttered through the air, clinging once to the tip of Banri's nose, but soon the wind carried it away.

Leaving the two of them and the roses behind on the road, the taxi took off.

"Wha,"

He looked over at Yanagisawa.

"Whaaaaaaa!"

Still holding the bouquet of roses, hair disheveled, Yanagisawa let out a long shout. Banri managed to stand up first, and extended his hand towards him,

"*Yana*-ssan, get ahold of yourself! Who was that!? I mean, what just happened!?"

Many people were looking towards them, Banri realized. For the most part, everybody was looking at Yanagisawa. He was still sitting on the ground, holding an enormous bouquet of roses, looking a bit out of place in the ordinary streetscape for sure. He was just like a time traveler out of some trendy soap opera from the bubble era. Passing along the street, groups of seemingly new students and businessmen were looking this way. Stares expressing surprise mixed with faint smiles. Some of them were pointing fingers, laughing.

Hey, look. Wow, incredible. What's up with that rose man? With that envelope and all, he's one of the freshmen from our school for sure. So mysterious! What is he doing? Isn't that rather awkward? There was muttering and whispering all around.

A bit disoriented, Yanagisawa stood up. Right then, as if in one last attack, the piled up flower petals came fluttering down from his head. Seeing them fall at his feet, looking at the bouquet of roses held to his chest,

"O..over... my student life... in one day, it's over...! Hahaha... ahahaha!"

Yanagisawa gave a distracted look and thrust one hand into his pocket. And then 'Whee!', pulling out a handful of petals that stuck there, he tossed them overhead. 'This can't go on', thought Banri, his shoulders twitching. As far as problems with the head were concerned, he had quite enough of his own.

"Hold on, *Yana*-ssan, you've really got to get ahold of yourself! Moreover, look... we have to reach the orientation in time!"

"Am I going to carry these gorgeous roses with me to the orientation!? I'd just be embarrassed, standing out like a sore thumb, and then, for four years of student life, what'll I do!? What do

they mean by 'Rose Man' anyway! Like some kind of 'Ham Man'...!"

"Well well, ah, please take this: Congratulations on your admission to the college."

Some freshman girls were staring at them as they passed by, and their eyes met. On the spur of the moment, Banri pulled a few roses out of the bouquet and extended them out to the girls. Whereupon, while saying things like "Eh, is that for me?", they quite happily reached out their hands for them. Seeing this some other girls said, "Those guys are giving away roses?" "You're kidding! I want one!" And they came on over.

This might actually work, he thought.

"That's right! I'm giving out roses! Congratulations on your admission to the college! I'm the Rose Man, please have a rose!"

"...What are you doing Banri?"

"*Yana*-ssan, you should give some away too. Ah, here you go."

Pulling them out one by one, they handed out more and more roses to people.

"If all other freshmen go to the orientation, holding roses, the only memory that will be left won't be 'On the day of the entrance ceremony, there was this strange guy holding roses', but rather it will have become 'On the day of the entrance ceremony, the freshmen received roses', am I wrong? For that reason, *Yana*-ssan too, come on, we're giving out a million roses to you and you and you and you! Yes yes, here you go, there's still more! Congratulations on your admission!"

Even the Aunt Squad, who were not looking like freshmen, cried "They're so pretty!", and "They're free!", and rushed over excitedly. "Could we please!?", their smiles directed at them.

"...Here you go!"

Even Yanagisawa smiled desperately, showing his teeth in a big grin while giving out roses to hand after hand.

"You are right! If I had stumbled right out of the gate, that Kouko would have had her way for sure. Even if she found out, we will be apart. We'll live in our own worlds. To that end, I went back and forth to cram school so I could get accepted here. In such a place, I wouldn't stumble! I won't become what Kouko wants me to be! My life as a student isn't over yet! Have a rose!"

They had about fifteen minutes left before the orientation start time.

* * *

Kaga Kouko.

That was her name it seems.

She had met Yanagisawa Mitsuo during her first year of elementary school. In those days, Kouko was a delicate, bullied little girl, whom he had protected. Because of this, she had latched onto him with all her might, saying that Yanagisawa was the 'prince of her dreams'.

"From that moment onwards, Kouko's dream has always been just one thing. 'Get married to Mitsuo!' ...scary, really."

"Scary? Why? Isn't that awfully romantic talk? A childhood promise… bound by fate to your childhood friend... sort of. That's good, totally. I mean, she is a really pretty girl, overflowing with charm, like an actress."

"You don't understand. You really don't know what it's like!"

His voice had risen only a little, but the girl seated in front of them looked back at Yanagisawa briefly. Lowering their voices, the two murmured "Sorry", and bowed their heads a little. They had been whispering too loudly.

The new law student orientation was taking place in a rather college-like way, in a wide classroom with seats arranged in tiers like a stairs. On the platform, a member of the Student Affairs department read into a microphone, "You have a duty to comport..." "Every effort to prevent accidents..." and so on, as he read out a number of important points regarding smoking, drinking and such.

A sweet smell floated across the wide space, coming from the deep red roses in the hands of a certain percentage of the students.

"...Didn't you get it from that moment earlier? Just because I don't move on to the same college as her, she ambushes me at the opening ceremony, beats me in the face with a monstrous bouquet of roses, and after she's done harassing me, she gives me a big bright smile and leaves, *that* kind of woman."

"She's a mess, she really is," he repeated in a soft voice like a groan.

"As far as Kouko is concerned, she has her life scenario fitting her so called 'perfect self'. She only sticks to me as part of that scenario of her perfect life. Whenever I tried to do something,"

Yanagisawa turned his face towards Banri. He separated his forelocks to the sides, disagreeably narrowed his eyes, almost cross-eyed, pushed out his chin, and with a strange tone of voice,

" 'Mitsuo! That's not right!' 'Mitsuo! That wasn't what I'd planned!' 'Mitsuo! Do what you're told!' 'Mitsuo! *Faufaufaufa!* ' 'Mitsuo! *Fafafafafaa!* ' ...That's what it was like. Not a way to

live."

It was funny, but not at all like her.

"Her face wasn't like that. Rather something like this,"

Banri drew his chin back, batted his eyelashes up and down while looking upward, working his shoulder slowly back and forth, and combed up his bangs... gently,

" 'I've... removed the thorns... n...' wiggle~... wasn't it like this?"

Yanagisawa gave him a cold look and shook his head.

"What was that? No, she isn't like that at all. Of course, what can you know from just one meeting? She is like, ' *Fuaaa!* Mitsuoo! *Nfuaaa!* ' 'It's *Fuafua*! Do *Fuafua*! Don't *Fafa*! *Faa!* Mitsuooo! *Faaaa!* '"

"Eh, isn't that just some lunatic? What I saw was 'Oh how silly... Mitsuo... h'."

"No no, she isn't like that at all! She is more like this! ' *Faffaa! Faaaaan!* Mitsuoo! *Faan!* ', but also,"

Yanagisawa probably wanted to demonstrate his expressiveness even more, the veins on his forehead showing, he lifted himself a little in his seat, twisting himself around, when finally,

"You there! Stop all that whispering!"

"..."

From the speaking platform a finger was pointing at him in warning. Yanagisawa flinched, awkwardly stiffened, and quietly sat back down on the more than uncomfortable, wooden bench-like seat. His cheeks flushed, he bowed his head while mouthing "Excuse me..." and like that he huddled himself up. Even Banri hurt from the piercing looks coming from around the classroom. This situation seemed even more embarrassing than the attack with the roses.

He snuck a sidelong glance at Yanagisawa's blushing face, who also looked back at Banri, "Don't say a thing", Yanagisawa expressed by simply holding his finger up before his mouth. And then rather than to cause trouble with more whispering, he scribbled something in pencil in the margin of one of their handouts.

'Anyhow, I'll be away from Kouko four years for sure!'

'I won't give up just because of that much humiliation! I'll enjoy my life as a student!'

'Hurray for a new life!!!'

'Freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeedom!!!'

And from the side you could see him grinning. His straight white teeth formed a perfect arc. *Yana*-ssan must come from a good family and place, Banri thought. Then, taking his pencil, rather than writing an answer, with a big grin, he drew a cat that was shouting "YES!!!".

Moving on to an explanation of the required classes and lectures for graduation, the special courses needed by those who wanted to move on to law school, the special courses needed for the civil service examinations, all of the different kinds of special qualification tests and so forth, they heard all sorts of important explanations, and the day's orientation ended at about noon. When he heard "The ban on recruiting for clubs will be lifted starting this afternoon," Banri looked over at Yanagisawa and their eyes met.

To really enjoy student life, you've got to have clubs. At least, Banri thought so. Selecting a club is, absolutely, the most important requirement, he thought. It happened when accompanied by Yanagisawa, he was just about to get up from his seat.

"Mitsuo! *Faafafafa! Faufaufaa!*"

"...Eh!?"

Suddenly a voice came from behind them. Banri and Yanagisawa looked back in unison. Banri saw white fingers placed firmly to Yanagisawa's forehead. ...Creak..., only Yanagisawa's head was made to turn around, like it was about to be twisted off from his body.

"*Faufaufaufaufaaaaaa!* ...am I like this I wonder?"

Yanagisawa's face went white, as if the blood were draining from his head. Reaching over the desk from the seat right behind and a bit above them, both hands holding his head, there floated the perfect smile of Kaga Kouko. Alone amongst the sober shades of blue and grey, shining white in a lace two-piece dress, there she was.

The whole time - - - she had been just behind them. Probably.

"W-W-W-W..." Yanagisawa's lips trembled.

"Why... why are you... what are you doing here!?"

"For the orientation, of course. It's only natural to be here."

Watching as Yanagisawa's face, trembling all the way to his nose, went pale directly in front of her, Kouko smiled, her rosy lips parting slowly. Of course, beautiful white teeth shone between those lips.

"I told you before, didn't I? I said, 'See you later'. Didn't you hear me? Or perhaps... *Fafafafafaa!*"

With a gesture like a caress, Kouko's beautiful finger slowly brushed Yanagisawa's hair.

"...was what you heard...?"

Her hands were fiercely swept away, and maybe out of frustration,

"What was that for?"

Kouko, still smiling but with a cold voice as sharp as a knife, folded her arms. Striking a pose with her chin lifted a bit, she looked down at Yanagisawa. Her large eyes shone like black jewels, mirroring the shadow of her long eyelashes. In all this, she seemed not to have noticed Banri at all.

"Don't you ask that! What in the world are you doing!? Why are you here at this orientation!?"

"I yielded to your desire and matched mine to it! I enrolled here too."

"*Fa*..."

"Now that's a happy face. For another four years, we'll be able to study together."

Yanagisawa held his breath, ran his hand through his hair three times, and because his hair was now all messed up, when he looked up at Kouko he looked like the angry ghost of a defeated soldier.

"...Y, your plans, what about them...!? In your plans for the future, didn't you want to move ahead in studying French Literature, spending three years studying abroad in France!? Hadn't you decided to build yourself a career in the fashion business!?"

Letting out a small sigh, Kouko slid her fingers down her glossy hair which reached below to where her chest swelled out.

"A small change was definitely required, but it wasn't difficult. Student life without you by my side would be meaningless. I had been thinking that you and I would go to college together, taking classes in business so we could take over my father's business. But I don't mind. It's the same for me whether my husband owns his own business or works as a corporate lawyer. Mitsuo, you betrayed me, planning to secretly take an outside examination. When I found out I was surprised, of course... but, rather than making a fuss to forcefully stop you, I thought it better to follow you. So I took almost all the entrance exams you took as well."

"...How, could the school of my choice, have gotten out... I asked my homeroom teacher to keep it secret, and yet... I didn't tell my friends, not anybody that I was taking the test..."

"This year they finished the medical faculty building. Did you know? It's called the Kaga Memorial Building."

"It was no problem hearing as much as the school you had chosen." said Kouko, once more showing a calm expression, lips relaxing to a broad smile. Horizontally across her bangs, a blue silk hairband with red-orange patterns framed her round white forehead. From her silhouette, following along to her small chin, and continuing past to the line of her long slender neck, she could hardly be more different from the other co-eds passing behind her. She was too sophisticated.

She had distinct features, that couldn't be described in any other way but being beautifully shaped.

"Aren't you happy too, Mitsuo? That I give you all my heart."

--- More than anything else, her expression of beaming self-confidence made her prettier than any other girl, Banri realized. Yet, she hadn't even noticed Banri's existence.

Yanagisawa, making a face like he'd eaten something bitter, stared back at Kouko, dumbfounded.

"Right? You're happy, right? Answer me, Mitsuo."

"...*Un*happy..."

"Really happy, right?"

"...Forever *un*happy..."

"The truth. You're happy, right?"

"Unhappy, I said! You're a nuisance! Despite my taking the outside exam so I could get away from you, you've gone and messed it all up! That's not something to be happy about!"

Suddenly, Kouko seemed to notice Banri's presence. She suddenly smiled pleasantly at Banri, who had been standing still next to Yanagisawa.

"Don't mind him. He's feeling out of sorts. Mitsuo is, so to speak, famous for being *that*."

Tsu, n, de, re.

Heh.

She tapped softly near her mouth with a beige-painted fingernail, and gave a small shrug of her shoulders. Like an actress on stage, she gave an exaggerated wink. Banri had no idea how he was supposed to react,

"Well, hmm, ...My name is Tada. What to say... well, nice to meet you... heh!"

Bending loosely, he pitched forward. Pushing Banri aside, Yanagisawa chose the primitive means of escape, by attempting to run off. "Oh! Mitsuo got away!", with that Kouko ran after him, highheels ringing boldly, running up the stairs. Kouko's beautiful form stood out, capturing the eyes of many freshmen, who then turned to each other to say something. There were quite a few of those, who knew that the gorgeous roses in their hands were originally her gift. Er, there must be guys around who saw the attack at the crosswalk.

"...I mean..."

Then he realized, after all, that he was alone again.

Left behind in the lecture hall, Banri looked around. Yanagisawa and Kouko's argument had drawn looks, and some glances were still turned towards Banri too. Ill at ease, he hurriedly threw the writing instruments left scattered on the chairs, into their envelopes.

"*Yana*-ssan has left everything behind..."

Gathering under his arm printed handouts of important stuff, syllabi, and various things belonging to Yanagisawa who had forgotten about them, Banri left the lecture hall in long strides up the stairs. They had exchanged their cell-phone numbers and e-mail addresses anyway, so returning them tomorrow won't be a problem.

Leaving through one of the many doors out to the corridor, he joined the swarm of the other freshmen. Plans for going out, first time introductions, the voices and laughter here and there echoed like a small explosion. The school building was old. The light coming from the flourescent fixtures was going yellow, there were braces here and there to stiffen the walls against earthquakes, and for some reason the windows had iron grillwork fitted to them. It was said that at one time this college had been the site of a violent student demonstration, and those things must have been the remains of that time.

Carrying at his side two people's worth of envelopes, Banri slowly descended the steps. In the designated smoking corner of the lobby, some freshmen (it was doubtful whether they had turned twenty or not), suits still on, were already hanging out. Glancing sideways, viewing the destination of the smoke they blew, following the guy in front of him, Banri also left the building.

That very moment.

"Freshman, congratulaaaatiooooooons!"

"...Wha...!?"

With a great commotion, before his eyes fluttered a storm of confetti. There was a big crowd of students, many more than just the freshmen.

What started to surround Banri and the other freshmen blinking from this unexpected twist, were all the huge members of the American football club, yelling, and standing in the first row of students. Their big bodies crammed into their uniforms, chanting their team's name in a peculiar way, they grabbed the guys that caught their eye and easily lifted them over their heads.

"You there, freshman, con-grat-u-lations! Up you go!"

"Not me, not me, no way! Excuse meee!"

His eyes having met one of the guys with a helmet, Banri bowed his head to the summons and ran down the entrance steps in a hurry. In front of his eyes, above his head,

"Are you not interested in comic storytelling? We are holding live events for students!"

"Waa, waa, waa ♪ Come and do Glee Club ♪"

"You there, you look like someone who would love camping! The camping research club is over here!"

"The Freshman Comedy Club welcome reception will start at two o'clock! It's free of course, and there'll be drinks!"

Between leaflets being shoved at him, hands inviting him over, and then tons of bursting smiles, Banri's path was blocked over and over again. On the verge of being crushed in the crowded mayhem, all of the freshmen, swinging their idiotic faces like the heads of pigeons feeding, were being coaxed to line up before the desks of the club booths. You couldn't say that the midtown campus was very wide, but every club appearing there now had started their club recruiting meeting, with costumes, music and everything imaginable.

There was a group in varsity jackets with the college name on them, who for some reason were wearing swimsuits and shouldering oxygen tanks. There were masked pro wrestlers in tights building a small temporary ring, miniskirted lacrosse girls with polo shirts, each of them so pretty like a model, and some otherwise unidentifiable guys, who were selling cold drinks from an enormous cooler for 50 yen apiece. "Information on leisurely taking lectures! Everything is printed here!", yelled a gang of reporter-like guys, waving something resembling newspapers, with Mass Communications Research Society written on their sashes.

Even the other uniformed bodies gathered around, tennis, and then judo, which together with the American Football club were suddenly livened up by cheerleaders. Swordfighting and archery were there too. The people in tuxedos and dresses must have been the ballroom dancing club. A cheering party dressed in black school uniforms, they were difficult to approach.

There slightly hunched and short built, somewhat baby-faced, without any aspiration stood an idle Banri. For this, only the clubs with cultural aspects called out to him. "The trains will always be on time!" ...Railroad Research Club? "Why not go to the beach twice a year?!" ...Manga

Culture Research Club? "Sunday morning is chaos!" ...Anime Research Club. And stranger, "Detective Novel Mystery Only Research Club", and "Maze Research Club", and even, this one catching his imagination a little, "Gigantic Structure Exploration Club". What could "On Mount Takao", even you can shake the mountain priest's hand" be?

He came back to himself to find that a mountain of leaflets had been pushed into his hands. Washed away by the raging wave of students from all grades jumbled together, Banri couldn't just stand still, and ended up at the center of the square. He intended to select which club they'd belong to with Yanagisawa, but in this madness, this uproar, he had no idea whether he could manage a clean escape.

"Aren't you a freshman!? We're the tea ceremony club, but young men are super-welcome too!"

"Ah, thanks..."

"Then for now, drink drink! Drink drink driiink! Drink driink! Drink drink driiink! Drink drink-ink-ink drink drink-ink-ink-ink drink drink driiink!"

"...Y, yes ma'am!"

Offered, rather insistently, a bowl of green tea, he tasted it while trying not to let the crowd rock his elbow. *Gah*, he drank the bitter stuff and returned the bowl. *The way to drink! Yes, good guy!* Clapping, the tea club moved on to their next target, *drink driink!* To the attack.

The back of his hand might have turned green as he wiped his mouth. At that moment - - - A loud whistle burst his ears. He looked up in surprise. From the other side of the campus, a group, playing Latin music of intense, danceable rhythm, was separating the herd of people, cutting through the crowd. The samba whistle was maddening. They had messed up hair, their own or wigs, gaudy beads woven into cornrows and really long dreadlocks, men and women alike dressed in bright green tight fitting leotards. They all had musical instruments in their hands. Singing in loud voices, they were a parade.

Incredible--- his mouth was hanging open already.

His ears breaking and his body shaking from the sound of the whistle, Banri's eyes were wide open. College is really cool. He hadn't thought it was cool like this. From this point on, for sure, life was going to get really cool.

This fast, arousing rhythm toyed with his body and made him feel like loosing to his instincts. He was convinced. At this place, for sure, he could become a new person. The days he had vainly spent pursuing the vision of his lost self were completely over.

The confetti dancing. The countless leaflets fluttering in the wind. The row of drums. The men's throaty shouts. The women's voices with their high-pitched laughter. Glorious, dazzling, madness of spring. The parade's rhythm shook him furiously, throbbing violently. He closed his

eyes, blackout, can't see anything anymore.

Tada Banri.

If you were to open your eyes, you might be able to see your own self reborn. The self waking up in a new room, meeting new friends, and falling asleep in that new room.

Before opening his eyes again, he tried to envisage something like making a wish. He would certainly see a wonderful new world with his new eyes. Fun, cheerful and satisfying, even if he had mistaken those for loneliness or solitude --- the whole of it glittering gold, like being dazzled all the time.

Let's go live like that every day. So many people to meet, so many people to love, so many people to live together with in this world. Banri celebrated the sprout of a new life, and wished this from the season called spring.

If he could live like that, then surely before long he would fall in love.

He wanted to love.

A single person, he wanted to admire someone so much, that nothing else could enter his heart. It may have been a worldly desire indeed, perhaps, but as Banri was an ordinary person, it couldn't be helped. He wanted to meet a single girl. He wanted to bet it all on love. He wouldn't mind if she wasn't such an exceptional partner in every way like *Yana*-ssan's.

He wanted to throw himself into the currents of fate. Diving into the rushing stream of this new world, the person you should meet, the one you should discover, grab hold of it with your own hands, Tada Banri!

With his eyes still closed he let out a big strong sigh,

"3, 2, 1... Ready..."

Go for it!, he thought, and opened his eyes.

Come on, the encounter of destiny!

Drumbeats all over the place.

"...Eh!? Whoa!?"

Shining before his eyes --- there was a crowd of dancers clad in brilliant emerald green. All the dancers were assembled in ranks surrounding Banri, and were stepping in place wonderfully. He had his eyes closed, ecstatically, lost in a daydream, and by the time he had noticed, the second half of the parade group, the dazzling samba squad had surrounded him. Or instead, because Banri was just standing there he got in the way of the all the dancers, and the parade couldn't

flow past him.

"Excuse me, excuse me", apologizing while trying to get through them, the hands and feet moving to the rhythm blocked his escape. Bending back and forth desperately so as not to disturb their choreography, the dancer's steps stabbing between his feet, in order to avoid hitting anybody he had no choice but to match their steps. Bit by bit, kicking his feet, swinging his hips, then in desperation,

"Heeeeeeeeeeeeyyy!"

Stretching out both hands, index fingers pointing to the sky, he gave a mighty pose, shouting with all his heart.

At almost the same time, somebody spun behind him, his headdress scoring a direct hit on the back of Banri's head. Crack! An easy knockout, he was about to fall clumsily flat on his face --- or so he thought for a moment.

His arm was grabbed hard, he was pulled up.

As if dragged out together with his twisted legs, Banri was yanked out of the line of dancers.

Stumbling a few steps he fell over to the feet of other students,

"No 'Hey!' from you, amateur. What were you doing?"

"...Ah..."

He saw that person.

"Freshman?"

He nodded.

The spectacle was outright surreal.

The person who helped Banri --- was wearing a kimono, white with flower patterns.A bright scarlet obi belt. And a hat shaped like a crescent moon. With the hat was secured under her chin with a red cord, her face was almost half hidden. What he could see his eyes were drawn to: full lips, tinged a vivid deep red. Like a scene from a period drama, in the stance of a traveler collapsed and nearly dead on the street, Banri had been caught by a rescuing goddess looking as if were from the Edo period.

"Which department are you from?"

"L... law department. I'm Tada Banri."

"I'm Linda."

Linda.

His reality was shifting yet again. He'd thought he'd been rescued from samba by a person from the Edo Period, and that person turned out to be a foreigner---

"My name's Hayashida, that's why Linda. I'm a sophomore. See ya later."

---Ah, Japanese.

"Errr...!"

Once he was standing, he involuntarily called after Linda. When she turned, beneath her hat a white face could be seen for a fleeting moment. Contrary to his expectations after her blunt words, she seemed to be a nice person.

"...Um, your lipstick... It is incredibly pretty..."

He had said it before he realized. What an abnormal thing he had blurted out. He had said it unintentionally. It was what came to his mind, at the spur of the moment.

"Disgusting!", she will leave him with those words, but Linda gave him a brilliant smile from beneath her hat. And then, swinging her supple, slim waist to the intense rhythm, she left Banri and turned towards the richly colored ranks of the parade.

As her form was on the verge of disappearing into the crowd, she turned around at the last moment. He could see her kimono sleeve swing as she threw him a kiss.

It knocked Banri for a loop, and he involuntarily slapped one hand over his stricken heart.

Twice in one day already, he'd received a kiss from the opposite sex... One of them wasn't intended for him. But,

"...Wow...!"

Having forgotten his lonely future for the moment, the spring just starting looked to be exciting.

Chapter 2

Tada Banri was eating a boiled egg.

Thursday, first period. If one attended for a given number of times, an "excellent" mark was easy to attain, so sports science was popular. It was five minutes before the lecture started.

Rather than miss breakfast because he slept in late, he had brought along the two remaining eggs he'd boiled last night in a plastic bag, and in the fifth row from the back he was quietly munching on them.

I was sitting on a seat diagonally behind him, watching this scene, but it was really dull. Banri brought a whole blue-capped bottle of Ajishio with himself, which was at his right hand. In his left hand, an egg. Writing with his right hand, he ate with his left. Write. Chomp. Write. Chomp. ...Really, truly, it was a dull scene. Speaking of highlights, he remembered his regret from last night, when he'd hurt himself while trying to crack the eggs with his own forehead, and the only result was pain. Changing his mind, he knocked the egg on the corner of his desk. Whack. the guy sitting near, an empty seat between them, gave out a startled sound.

Did you bring boiled eggs? Yep. Did you bring salt too? Yep. And so on. A conversation nearly blossomed, but shortly the guy's buddy showed up, so Banri turned back quietly to his boiled eggs.

The girls right behind Banri, so he couldn't hear them, were typing notes to each other on their cellphone displays. That guy in front of us petrified his eggs, didn't he? They're overcooked. The yolks have turned black. He's drinking so much oolong tea. You can see his lips wrinkling. It looks like he brought salt in a bottle. LOL. And so on.

Banri didn't notice he was being talked about.

Nor me without a body, viewing him all the time.

In the week and some days that had passed since the entrance ceremony, it had been registration time, and the campus overflowed with students. From the confused freshmen like Banri, who received information on lectures from their seniors at the club recruiting event, to the seniors in their suits. Holding huge schedules about the size of tatami mats, that were on the verge of tearing at the folds from opening and closing them while strolling about the corridors, going to and from classrooms, occupying benches, sending messages by cellphone.

But the only time so many students come to college must be in the spring, I think. Once the long summer vacation is over, half the campus population will naturally disappear. One or two of them, perhaps a few more, might even lose their bodies like me. Which means that they died. I'm not waiting for it eagerly though, really, but that kind of thing can't be avoided.

Banri had better pay attention too. Unaccustomed to drinking, unaccustomed to staying out late at night, living alone out from under his parents eyes, fresh driving license, new friends, with an excess of energy, lots of free time to waste --- the world of young men is full of danger.

Sports Science was the most popular easy-credit course, and all the students were filing into the classroom. The seats were filling steadily from the back. In any case nobody can see me, and since in my state I cannot affect anybody, it really didn't matter where I was, but for some reason, I got the feeling that I should give up my seat. The clicking of highheels rang out, and from down the aisle a girl came and sat in that very seat.

Banri’s mouth still bulging full of boiled egg, he turned at the presence of the girl.

The lecture about to start, another one came running into the classroom. Her Nikes made hardly a sound. It was Linda.

Linda still standing in the aisle, unseated, noticed Banri and looked at his profile. Banri didn’t notice this. He didn’t notice my existence either, of course.

* * *

"Today, Kaga-san talked to me."

"Really? What did she say?"

"She said 'Takada-kuuun'."

"There's an extra syllable", Yanagisawa laughed uproariously, while he slid a cutter along the cover of a cardboard box. Turning his T-shirt's back to Banri, he sat as if over an old japanese style toilet, in an orderly fashion cutting the packing tape from all four sides of the box.

This place is Banri’s castle. Its name is Neo-Phoenix. This apartment, even if burnt down any number of times, would reborn from the flames... it felt like. Room number 204.

A small twenty square meter 1K, but with a wooden floor. Not new construction, but relatively new. No need to change lines commuting to school, direct connection. Facing to the northeast, but at least a corner room. The room his mother liked was a much larger 1DK, same rent, but Japanese style, with bright southern exposure, but built twenty-four years ago. Its big closet seemed convenient and the room wasn’t all that run down, but he’d been a little nervous that it was older than himself, so he’d decided on this room instead. There wasn’t much furniture and other stuff yet, and maybe because of this, it was comfortable for now.

Unconsciously searching for bald spots on the top of Yanagisawa's head, Banri was sitting on a tall stool set in the combined kitchen and entryhall, his feet swinging idly. In spite of it being from a second hand shop, and costing only four hundred yen, it was stable and pleasant to sit on. There were some strange stains scattered about on the top, they bothered him, but he didn’t care.

Yanagisawa grabbed the cutter again from where he had set it on the floor, cutting clean through the rest of the packing tape. Banri's mother, worried about her helpless son, had sent him a care package from Shizuoka, almost at once.

"So, when I told her that I wasn't Takada, she said 'Oh, pardon me, ta, Tanaka-kun'."

"She only got the 'ta' right. You see, that's the kind of person Kouko is. She doesn't pay much attention to others, and doesn't remember their names. She's always full of things related to herself. Let's see, it's open now. Just what kind of treasure has your mother sent?"

"I said my name is not Tanaka either, but I'll give her a hint, it's two-letters, she gave me 'Two letters...? Kaga-kun...?' That's your last name, right? I said. "

"Didn't you just make that up now? ...Oh! Look, Banri!"

Turning to face him with a delighted expression, Yanagisawa lifted the open box with some difficulty, and tilted it towards Banri to see.

"Incredible, Tada Mieko-chan, you really know how to choose! Wonderful choice!"

"What's that? And anyway, how did you know Mieko is her name?"

"Because I looked at the return address, of course! I love Mieko! Look at these ramen! Yakisoba cups! It's enough to make a guy cry... ah! Pasta! There's pasta sauce too! Calorie Mate pastries, canned tuna, canned mackerel, sweets, and also... what's this? A film case? And there's three more."

Getting up from the stool, Banri peeked into Yanagisawa's hands.

"Ah, those. There's tea powder in them. We grind it at home, so the containers are just something random. You put about a half teaspoon into the cup with hot water and drink it as is, you don't need a teapot nor a strainer. You want one? It's super easy, and you can drink the tea leaves entirely, which is said to be good for your body too."

"Gimme gimme gimme! I'd love to do my body some good! Oh, there's a letter stuck in here."

The white envelope surrendered to him, Banri sat down again on the stool. On the front, only "From Mother" was written. Letters like rain-wetted willow leaves could be seen.

Lectures long over, it was nine in the evening.

Yanagisawa's condo was about three train stations away from here, and when he heard that a care package from home had arrived for Banri, the guy had said "see you in five minutes", and flew over, at night, by bicycle. Aiming to get something for nothing, the mooching rascal. That he really showed up in five minutes was scary... just kidding of course.

Yanagisawa seemed to have been raised in affluent surroundings; he certainly lived with a certain refinement, Banri reflected. But according to him, it seemed things had gone somewhat sour in his parent's house after he faced them down over taking the outside examinations. In any case with no hope of getting a school expense allowance, despite a long time interviewing like crazy for part time jobs, looking for a job anywhere, he still hadn't gotten one, and it was still unclear how he will pay his tuition. (he himself thought it was 'My parents or Kouko's fault!', but the real reason wasn't known). For now, as he had no other choice but to endure at a temporary job, he got a painful lesson about his future.

"What's the letter about? They are telling you to share everything among your friends, aren't they?"

The letter mentioned no such thing, though Banri of course intended to share what he got.

"Take care of yourself. Don't skip classes. Don't spend too much time on the internet. Get enough exercise. Keep in mind that there are responsibilities that go with being an adult. ...Like that."

He even showed Yanagisawa the five lines of text written on the paper, put the paper back in the envelope and stuck it in a kitchen drawer. While he wasn't looking, Yanagisawa grabbed a few packs of microwave ready meals out of the box.

"Ah! Just a second *Yana*-ssan, would you mind not putting your hands on *him*?"

He planned to share everything he got, but that was a different matter.

"As far as I'm concerned, Satou-san is something special. I couldn't share that even with you, *Yana*-ssan."

Yanagisawa obediently said "I see...", and nodded, quietly returning the ready meals back to the box.

"Well then, what about ramen? Could I have some ramen? How many would be OK? There are four bags with five packs in them each. A total of twenty."

Up to five, he thought, but instead

"You can have half of what I've got..."

Out of kindness. At a glance, he could see three or four mosquito bites where his pal's arm extended out from his T-shirt.

"Also, if you like sweet stuff, you can have all of the cookies too..."

"Really? You're giving them to me! Why!?"

"Because you looked so pitiful, putting up with the mosquitos having a bite of you... and yet, it’s only April..."

"Yeah, it got soo itchy not long ago."

"Besides, when I moved in I've brought a lot with me. There's a factory in my neighborhood that makes them, and a relative of mine works there, making so-called second class goods. I can get a ton of the stuff from them. So at my parent’s house this is the only thing we can eat without limits. I don’t think we’ve had to buy this stuff at list price in all my life."

"Really!? That ‘second-class stuff’ is just as good as the real thing! It’s been that way since you were a kid? If I were little, I’d be dancing around for this stuff!"

"Childhood, ...well... what was that like?"

"Come on now, you had your own."

"So I did, but... So I did, but yeah, I guess I did."

Yanagisawa’s laughter washed away Banri’s vague response. He spread out a yellow plastic bag from Matsukiyo, that was wrapped into a pentagon in an old-fashioned way, and immediately, chuckling to himself, started stuffing cookies into it.

While Banri was watching sidelong, his mouth opened a little. He took a breath, like a child watching a jump rope, trying to figure out when to jump into it, his head bobbing slightly. "By the way...", he tried to start. But. Hesitating just a little, becoming strangely reticent, Banri’s gaze darkened. ---Impossible. Stop. Let's put it off for today after all. Not more just a bit grave timing is... not yet.

His chest filled with air, he had to let it out little by little so it wouldn’t be noticed. He couldn’t say it today either, but that was OK. Next time, next time.

In a high pitched voice, he playfully called "*Yana*-ssan!" "Gross!" his new friend answered in the same falsetto, without turning his head.

"Anyway, can we go back to the previous conversation? What I said about Kaga-san. I met her in the first period today."

"Ah, sports studies? I was perplexed about it but I'm glad I haven't attended."

"Kaga-san asked me to tell her everything about your schedule."

Yanagisawa had been grabbing various flavors of ramen noodles, one by one, glaring at them like licking them with his hungry eyes, as he decided which he would take back with him, but then he suddenly stopped moving. Soon, still crouched down, he turned slowly to look up at Banri, who was seated on his stool swinging his feet. Mitsuo's face became serious. After his

somewhat refined features, this sudden lack of expression was rather scary.

"...Perhaps, you..."

"No no no! I wouldn't tell her, as I know you've been trying to avoid her."

Saying something like "Good", Yanagisawa nodded his still-serious face. Because of how he was sitting after turning back, one knee on the ground, he wound up looking like a dog trainer.

And then, as if to say "Come on!", he pointed a finger at Banri bending it a few times, gesturing "OK, keep on talking."

"...But, even Kaga-san herself seems to have realized that you are avoiding her. She was sighing, 'Whenever he sees me, he runs away, he even avoids having the same lectures with me. Coming to this college just to be together with Mitsuo is meaningless this way...'"

"It's not like her so stop it. But well, it really is that way. Even she understands, sort of."

"'So, as kidnapping is a no-no, could you please give information once *Yana*-ssan's registered his classes?' she asked. She postpones her registration until you do, as it seems she wants to match yours."

Yanagisawa gave quite a frown.

"Which I refused to do of course, from the start. And then she said something like 'I wouldn't want it for free.'"

"...She's that kind of girl, so she..."

Tsk, Yanagisawa clicked his tongue, his mouth twisted with a fed-up look, and he rotated his head. There was a loud crackling sound, echoing as if from the depths of the underworld. Might that be a threat? But to whom?

"When I heard that, as you would expect, I put on a face like 'What is that supposed to mean?' Then even Kaga-san seemed to realize my refusal, and stopped nagging me. Though she was seated behind me and to the side, she must have felt uncomfortable, "See you", she said and moved up to the first row of seats. With nobody else in the front row she was alone, sitting there, and it seemed that she had nobody else to talk to..."

"Well, not that I had anyone to talk to either, since *Yana*-ssan wasn't coming", Banri went on, and this morning's scene entered his mind.

Amongst the other students, dressed in their colorless jeans and hoodies, Kouko, wearing what must have been brand-name, an order or two of magnitude more expensive than the others, a bright pink, one piece silk dress, she really stood out from the crowd.

Dark brown hair spilling over her shoulders, in her ears were diamonds set in flower-shaped earrings. Her arms so white, her wrists so delicate, her neck so smooth it was scary, she could hardly be more different from the rest of the class.

Besides, seen from the side, she appeared to be bored, listening to the lecture. Her profile was pretty without doubt. Even Banri as a guy understood, that she was spending her time carefully doing her makeup. It was not only Banri watching her profile fixedly for an hour and a half for sure. But everybody in the classroom --- both boys and girls, even the professor, was looking at the rose-scented Kouko, he thought.

There was not a single person, Banri included, to call out to her.

"As I saw Kaga-san like that, somehow I..."

When the lecture ended, Kouko, in order to shake free from the many eyes that had glued themselves to her, quickly left the classroom. Colliding with another student at the door, she halted, flashed her perfect princess-like smile, and signed with her hand for him to go ahead. Seeing that, some students near Banri commented, "So forced.", "She's always wearing nothing but brand-name stuff.", "'Cause her parents've got money, of course!", "That, or she's turning tricks?", "Some guy bought it for her, for sure.", and so on, tossing biting words back and forth.

Society is always harsh towards anything that's different.

"Well, she seemed quite... pitiable, to me."

At Banri's words, Yanagisawa's eyes opened wide and his face twisted. "Huh?", he made an exaggerated gesture, and with an expression that could have been taken as a confused smile, he asked,

"What? Do you perhaps sympathize with Kouko?"

"A little, yes. Really, just a little. You too, if you'd seen it you would..."

"Not."

To the words that were returned in an instant, "But, look..." he tried to retort.

"But reaaalllyyy! Life is so easy for beautiful girls!"

Overcome by the sudden force of that line, even Banri fell silent.

"She can do whatever she wants, and fix it by making such a face that makes others think 'poor thing', 'poor thing'! You are the same, you were there with me when she attacked us with roses, and yet because she was pretty you didn't get angry, right? Instead you say things like 'poor thing', right? She didn't injure me, though it did hurt, but most of all she humiliated me! What would it be like if an ugly girl did the same thing? What if a really ugly one blasted you with a

bunch of roses? You would have been like ‘scram, get out of here’, am I right? Even if some diarrhea faced girl were to turn and chase after me, could you say the same thing? Could you speak of how pitiful and lonely she is? You couldn't, right? Anyhow..."

He declared, pointing at Banri’s nose with his finger, but even with that, Yanagisawa still couldn't vent his frustration. Wrinkles gathered about his nose as he repeatedly tried to move his bangs away from his face.

"...All and every one of them say the same thing, after all it’s somebody else’s problem. ‘She's beautiful so don't mind it’, ‘I envy you’, ‘I want to be in your place’, ‘What is your problem?’ ‘Don't be selfish’... If you’re beautiful, are you automatically loved? No way. Seriously, put yourself in my shoes. Everybody’s been too easily fooled."

He roughly opened another Matsukiyo bag turning his back, but Banri had something to say too.

"What’s with you? Not that I've ever said anything like those! I refused to tell her your schedule even after she asked, didn't I?"

He didn’t deserve to get a sermon. For that matter, be it all or every one of whoever, there was no reason to include him in the same lot.

"It may be true that I sympathize with her because she’s beautiful, but that’s within my rights. But I don’t think that you must go and talk with Kaga-san! If you want to ignore somebody, that’s your right. But you don’t have the right to make somebody else do so. As for me, when I saw Kaga-san alone I felt sympathy for her. Because of that, I’m thinking that the next time I see her I will call out to her."

"...Is that so?"

He was serious, he nodded.

Today’s encounter with Kouko was cut off with him giving her a sharp look in refusal. That ambiguous conclusion made him feel awfully bad. It left a bad aftertaste.

He had no intention to give Yanagisawa’s course information to Kouko like she wished, but it was because he wanted to give priority to *Yana*-ssan's wishes. On the other hand, Banri himself wasn’t holding anything against Kouko, and he wanted to make sure she knew of this somehow. Even though he was brought into the conflict, even though his friend loathed her, even though his name wasn't remembered, even though he was never even noticed to begin with, Banri didn't hate her for such reasons. He could not reject her.

Like Yanagisawa said, it may be simply because Kouko is beautiful. It could be that he only felt sympathy for her because she’s beautiful. But, let's suppose--- If Kouko’s appearance wasn't that pretty, say, she looked like some rascal instead, even if she did the same things, Banri didn’t think he could come to hate her. Or you might say, he didn’t want to be like that.

Yanagisawa stopped talking back. He was sullenly silent, frowning, looking down at the bag stuffed with candy and ramen. Saying "I don't need these", he would leave, ending the friendship they had only just built. If that happened, what should he do? Should he apologize? But what about? Banri awkwardly stared at his own tiptoes. Really, he had no idea what he should do. He didn't have the experience for this situation. However,

"Well, ...you have a point. Just because I'm avoiding Kouko, that doesn't mean I have the right to make you do so too."

His irritation and hunger were pulling him in different directions, but it appeared that hunger was getting the upper hand.

Or that perhaps he really wanted to keep his friendship with Banri.

Yanagisawa shrugged his shoulders and said, "Let's stop this. Kouko is not something we should argue about." Was it the free stuff, or rather their friendship? Whatever he really felt about this matter, there was no reason for them to argue, Banri agreed. "Yeah", he said, and got down from his stool.

"This is what being friends is about."

He put a pack of microwave ready meal into the vinyl bag. What is more, two of them.

* * *

Banri caught sight of Kaga Kouko in front of a club recruiting booth in the first floor lobby.

It was after the fourth period, moreover on Friday, and many large groups of people were streaming to club welcome parties for new members. All the booths that were nothing more but long tables lined up, were getting a lot of traffic. It was already almost impossible to see where one club started and another ended. The lobby was jammed with students from all college years mixed together in great turmoil. As they were distractedly walking and chattering, some guys stepped on Banri's feet, hard. He shouted automatically. When he looked back, they weren't there. It was so deafeningly noisy in that confusion, that Banri's voice was swallowed without a trace.

In the middle of all those students, Kouko was by herself today too.

An air pocket, about one meter around, isolated her from the Friday crowd, leaving her alone. Her head bowed, the white nape of her neck exposed, she was reading some pamphlets in her hands. To Banri, she looked like a flower in bloom.

Nobody was approaching her.

Beneath the old fluorescent lights, as if wearing muddy shadows, everybody were sunken under a shade, but somehow the silhouette of Kouko seemed to be shedding a faint, gentle white light. Yet that same appearance created an atmosphere that made it difficult to call out to her. Even the gangs of fanatical club recruiters seemed to be keeping their distance from her. There were guys peeking at her, passing through the three-meter wide area around the air pocket, hardly noticeably pointing fingers at her and whispering. Whether it was restraint, or paralysis, to Banri it seemed that everybody was avoiding "to be the first guy to talk with her".

Perhaps she was simply too overwhelming.

Anyhow, they all had to be thinking that she wouldn't talk with them, or that she must be different from them, or that talking with her would be pointless. That they wouldn't understand each other. To tell the truth, even Banri was thinking a bit like that.

Today too, Kouko's outward appearance was just right. Her gently curled hair was bound by a black satin hairband, such as a rich lady might wear. Light yellow fluffy blouse with a matching gray flared skirt, strapped high-heeled sandals. Her soft leather purse was black, although it had no brand marks. Beautiful face. Beautiful figure.

In comparison with the pink mini one piece dress of the day before, it looked like she intended to tone it down a bit. But, as usual when compared to the other co-eds, she could hardly be more different. Thinking that this difference is so unfortunate, craning his neck from the shadow of a pillar, Banri gazed at Kouko's slender, well proportioned waist. Though it couldn't be said, that with the other people passing behind her, she would have looked like a crane in the garbage dump--- about as different as a pearl from crabs. About as different as the 'Birth of Venus' receiving the blessing of angels and shining among waves is from sea grapes arranged in an oyster shell, and served wearing geta. Yes, around that much.

By the way, it wasn't that Banri was hiding in order to stare at Kouko as much as he wanted, but rather because of the older girls of the Tea Ceremony Club right next to her.

This week he and Yanagisawa had made the rounds of all the clubs that were trying to recruit new members, getting all sorts of free food and drink. They visited the tennis club, the gourmet club and the advertising club; out of curiosity they even peeked at the large scale party of another college's event club... and then went to the Tea Ceremony Club too.

The drinking party of the Tea Ceremony Club was fun as such. But, the mood with only women was formidable (Crying out "My dear elder sister, that smells delicious!", girls bowing so deep down in the tatami room, that they almost push their faces into their senior's groins isn't something you see often...), and seeing the few male members used as slaves was terrifying as well. 'You there! Bring the pitcher!' 'You! Pour!' 'Hey you! Decide where we're going next!' 'You fish! Distribute this to everyone!' 'Hey hey! Do you think the Tea Ceremony Club is for bowling?!' 'Gulp.. Elder sister, it's delicious!' It went like this. *Male help is warmly welcomed!*

Come join the club! Let's work together! Such invitation e-mails full of sparkling swarms of emoticons, mostly sent out by the older guys, were even more frightening.

So, not wanting to be seen by the girls if at all possible, Banri was hiding behind the cover of a large standing sign, that was carried by a group that luckily happened to pass by. Bent over, he moved behind the thin plywood, getting closer to Kouko with small steps. For some reason there were big and small holes, just in the right places in the sign.

"Kaga-san, what you doing?"

"...This is, unexpected..."

Hiding his nervousness, he popped his face out of one hole, just right for a face. He stuck his right hand out of another hole, just right for a right hand. The front of the sign, bearing a full length portrait of Sakamoto Ryoma, had had the hand and face removed so that people could pose and have their pictures taken there. It was a little surreal that Ryouma, carried at an angle surprisingly called out to Kouko, moreover,

"Aah! Ouch!"

As it was, with the sign being carried sideways, Banri's head was about to be torn off. He was scolded by the guys realizing this. Probably, they all were from the history club.

Pulling his head and hand out, Banri appeared from behind the sign. For only a moment, Kouko stared at him, bewildered.

"...Um,"

But right away, her perfect lady-like smile could be seen again. The short conversation that ended unpleasantly yesterday, her loneliness just now, as if declaring "I'm pretending like those have never happened!" she smiled sweetly.

"Takada-kun. It's OK if I call you that, right? Good day!"

Still getting it wrong.

"Tada, Tada Banri. Since I saw you were alone, I was wondering what you are doing here."

"Yes, yes, Tada-kun. Good day!"

While she smiled beautifully with her deep red lips, Kouko wasn't looking at Banri's face at all. She seemed to be looking all around him, searching for somebody else. Banri figured she was probably looking for Yanagisawa. That guy told him that today he was going to the welcoming party of the Video Research Club. Banri was invited too, but all those real movie otaku like older students left him feeling overwhelmed and he'd decided to do something else instead.

"If you're looking for *Yana*-ssan, he's got a meeting today."

Kouko blinked and only moving her pupils, she finally looked at Banri's face.

"Where at? ...Even if I asked, you wouldn't tell me, right? Tada-kun?"

While slipping a finger through her glossy hair, she raised her chin a little bit. White teeth glistening through her fixed smile, she slowly eyed Banri up, from the top of his head to the tip of his shoes and back. Folding her arms, giving an unusual impression, she slightly tilted her head to the side,

"Or perhaps you've changed your mind?"

Deliberately taking plenty of time, she blinked once more.

She gazed at Banri with a perfect smile, her eyes fixed on him, not moving.

But not so much as to make him feel any hostility, though.

"No, ...that hasn't changed."

"Of course."

Out of habit, perhaps, she ran her fingers through her hair again.

From those gestures alone, thoughts like "she may be pretty scary..." had come to mind. That might be because her expression, with the prettily upturned corners of her mouth, didn't convey any temperature at all. It wasn't too warm nor too cold, too dry nor too wet. There wasn't even the doubt of anything artificial in it. Simply with overwhelming sense of indifference, that smile shone beautifully in front of Banri.

Under the strength of those flashing black eyes, Banri suddenly couldn't understand why he felt pity for her yesterday. As she was standing there, her figure supplely twisting at the waist, with good looks, a smile and fashionable to boot, was she not perfect? He couldn't see any weaknesses nor faults. He had a feeling nobody in this world could outshine Kaga Kouko.

Already forgetting just why he wanted to talk to her, saying "Well then, please pardon me...", with that like a clumsy crayfish, he tried to get away with the flow sideways, but

"Ah, Tada Banri!"

He'd been caught off guard.

"What is this, which new club are you going to now!? Are you maybe cheating on us!?"

"We're drinking again today aren't we? You're coming, of course?"

Somebody had caught both his shoulders firmly and was shaking them. He'd been discovered. This was the dreadful duo of second-years of the Tea Ceremony Club Girls. Their names: Sao-chan and Shii-chan. Sao-chan was fierce, and Shii-chan relatively absentminded by comparison. These older girls stuck like glue to the babyfaced Banri, who was easygoing and outwardly lacked many of the less redeeming qualities of guys. Well, it wasn't all that bad, but as you might expect, it wasn't all that good either.

"Ah... uwaa... ladies... Greetings..."

"Don't give us 'Greetings'! You're a spoiled brat!"

At any rate, it was quite frightening. While being poked in the ribs by Sao-chan,

"Come on, why don't you make up your mind already and sign up quickly for our club? For that matter, wouldn't you answer to our boys' e-mails? They were crying because they got no answer! Hmm?"

"Wha'!"

Shii-chan sluggishly inserted the end of a pen into the opening of his ear. Banri's back was about ready to break, aah, please, no more... he was on the verge of joining the Tea Ceremony Club, when,

"Ah, sorry. You've got company."

It seemed as if Sao-chan and Shii-chan had only just then noticed Kouko's existence, who'd been looking at them with slightly tilted head.

Letting go of Banri, looking at each others faces for an instant, they looked at Kouko again. Her smile perfect as always, Kouko waited for introductions, keeping her mouth shut like a well trained house dog. The two older girls once again looked at each others faces and said, "Well, then, send an e-mail if you feel like it", "Catch you later, Tada Banrii", sluggish wave, and they left.

Banri, who had no plans to join the Tea Ceremony Club, was saved by Kouko.

"...What was this about, I wonder?"

Her tone of muttering didn't sound like a monologue.

Kouko placed her slender finger by the side of her chin, as if wondering, and lightly turned towards Banri.

"Hey Tada-kun, what do you think? About this."

"Eh? This was..."

Right in front of him. Kouko was looking at him from point blank range, and once more he gulped, thinking ‘She sure has a nice face!’ Sadly, it seemed like her gaze itself was no different than before.

"T, they were two girls from the Tea Ceremony Club, I think."

"I wasn’t talking about that."

"They are called Sao-chan and Shii-chan."

"I don’t want to know their stage-names either."

Kouko slowly shook her head, coming even closer to him. Then, for some reason lowering her voice,

"...Could you answer me honestly? Setting Mitsuo aside for the moment, I really want to know this."

Eh? Eh? Once more Banri’s nose twitched, tickled by a thick sweet aroma.

"Tada-kun, from the entrance ceremony to now, how many clubs have you been invited to join?"

She was wearing rose scent again today--- recovering his reason, he returned from that dangerous place where his brain was about to melt. Kouko was waiting for an answer.

"Please, answer. How many?"

"'How many', so to speak… err, well... I’ve visited around five or six recruitment meetings... including those times when I turned back at once, and when I sneaked into the afterparties, umm umm, but"

Banri, trying to cover up, that even though he wasn't a kid anymore, he got so nervous in a situation like this, desperately searched his memory, but,

"The number of invitations itself, precisely, well... there is no way I could remember them all, and what counts as an invitation is vague too, and there were countless times they just called out to me."

Ever since the entrance ceremony, the chaotic recruiting meetings hadn’t stopped. As soon as freshmen passed in front of the club booths, the older students of every club swarmed out like hyenas. Both Banri and Yanagisawa, they were caught so many times, leaflets stuck in their pockets, and invited to welcoming parties. They had to at least make a visit at the places they fancied. Clubs coming from affiliated schools, with already established connections were probably engaged in smarter and more promising activities though.

"...Countless..."

Skillfully keeping her smile, Kouko went on,

"That's... very *many, many many manyyy*, right...?"

"Kaga-san... are you Ruu Ooshiba...?"

"I'm..."

Quickly looking both ways, checking the coast was clear, she rolled up leaflets of some places she had in her hand, and put them to Banri's right ear. And then in an unexpectedly low voice, as if she were confessing something shameful,

"Not one."

Her breath seemed to burn his right ear.

Not seeming to be bothered by Banri's surprised expression, Kouko backed off, one hand on her hip. Through the prettily upturned corners of her mouth, her white teeth shone. Even though her pose, her smile was decidedly like that of an actress,

"...I wonder why? Why, why would nobody even raise their voice to call me?"

Oh boy, he thought.

She couldn't hide the slight shaking of her tone of voice, coming from her tilted head, revealing her inability to endure the isolation. That's how it sounded to Banri, at least.

Kouko's form radiated loneliness, and the reality was brought home to him once more. "Life is so easy for beautiful girls!", he remembered even Yanagisawa's voice shouting. Everybody's been too easily fooled!--- Really?

Am I fooled here for certain?

But, for now, that the woman was in front of him in the flesh, Banri's heart hurt. That thing is for sure.

"Not that I would be interested in clubs! I don't want to be invited. I don't even think about such things as joining any, if I can't be with Mitsuo. But, somehow, I'm so much... I don't know how should I put this... Since coming here, at any rate, I've completely..."

So lonely, so pathetic. So,

"...turned invisible, I feel. Like I'm being ignored, that's what I feel like. And not just by Mitsuo. ...By everybody around me."

Message received, loud and clear! Leave it to me! *Yana*-ssan's classes, his club plans, I'll tell you everything, so go ahead and intrude on him! I'm supporting you!--- Is it like that?

In sympathizing with the person before his eyes, was he simply being deceived and taken in by a pretty face? Basically, was he being used as a means to get to *Yana*-ssan?

Or is it that Kaga Kouko was really beaten down by the lonely days?

But even in being deceived and used, was there any harm in that? Was there? At the least if his sympathy towards her would make him reveal information about Yanagisawa, that would cause the guy a lot of harm. ...I see, so is that why he is so alert when Kouko arouses sympathy? As for himself, ...what should he do?

As for himself, what does he want to do?

Is showing sympathy wrong? Do I not want to be deceived? And why? For Yanagisawa's sake?

Not understanding anything, he was lost in how to express his feelings. Banri gazed up into space, his mind a blank. Divine revelation, the promptings of a guardian angel, no matter where it came from, a message showing him what to do would be welcome, he even had such foolish thoughts. But of course, such things cannot happen. He had to think with his own head and heart.

Kouko said,

"Am I so strange, I wonder."

As if striking her round forehead with the pamphlets in her hand, she hid her face with a thud. Only the shape of her mouth could be seen, that she forced into a smile.

"I wonder if that is why not even Mitsuo will accompany me."

"...Kaga-san, is that..."

Was this an act to extract *Yana*-ssan's information from him?

Or, for real,

"...breaking your heart?"

"No."

Smiling broadly in the shape her lips were fixed, she had spoken that one word without hesitation. Her raising intonation showing unconcern had resounded quite firmly.

He had been staring at her mouth without thinking, when,

"Ah, you are interested in our club? Sorry, sorry, the booth was left unattended for a bit!"

Somebody raised the pamphlets Kouko used as a cover for her face, and there was a woman grinning on them.

Kouko looked at her with surprise in her wide open eyes. Just what was her face like behind those pamphlets, nobody will ever know.

"You two, you're freshmen, aren't you? Thank you for your interest. We are an *all-around*, well, simply put, 'cherry blossom viewing drinking party in the spring, seaside barbecue drinking party in the summer, autumn-leaf hunting drinking party in the autumn, snowboarding drinking party in the winter' club, with a carefree attitude. We have students from many colleges, you will make lots of new friends. I'm not really a student here; I'm a third year from **** girl's college."

Materializing unexpectedly, the person was taller than either Kouko or Banri. She wore slim denims with a matching V-neck knit top, and swinging from her neck was a silver necklace shaped like a snowflake. Hair cut in a bob, covering her ears, cheerful, pure looking and refreshing, somehow seeming like a television announcer.

"You look a little down in the mouth, though. What's up? Are you OK? Ah, perhaps something happened during the solicitations?"

She anxiously looked into Kouko's face. In an instant, Kouko had her usual smile restored,

"Far from it. I'm doing fine. Thank you very much."

With a princess-like attitude, she calmly bowed her head. Reflexively, Banri bowed his head too, in unison with her.

"That so? In that case good. In case anyone is too insistent, or causing you any trouble, then by all means tell me, OK? There seem to be some pushy fellows, the tennis club has such a bad reputation. I heard that they're super insistent in doing their invitations. By the way, you two, what are your names?"

"Ah, er, I'm Tada. Tada Banri."

"My name is Kaga."

"I see, I see. Tada-kun and Kaga-san, right? Have you been to any club welcoming parties?"

"Eh? Well, um, yes", seeing Banri nod,

"Ah, I see! Where, where? Where were you at?"

The upperclassman girl from the 'all-around club' peppered him with questions. Banri wanted to

give an honest answer, listing all of them, but,

"Ah, I've got an idea!"

With a cheerful smile, she clapped her hands and spoke, interrupting him.

"If it’s all right with you, could you tell me about it, perhaps over tea? I mean, it's only that I got so thirsty, look, from spending all day long in this booth asking, 'Are you a freshman?', I’m exhausted! Will I be scolded even if I'm skipping, if I hang out with underclassmen? Right? Haha, places at the station like the Doutor are always so terribly crowded, but did you know, that there is actually a nice and little-known coffee shop? You didn't, right? And that their café au lait is a decent *café au lait bowl*? By the way, Tada-kun, do you know about it? What the *café au lait bowl* is."

"...Eh? Well, no... I don’t know."

"Really-- boys don’t know that feeling, but as for me, I love coffee, and-- well, most girls are the same I think."

The upperclassman gave Banri a light poke in the shoulder. And then she gleefully turned her smile towards Kouko,

"Girls understand, right?"

"Eh?"

"Café au lait bowl! You know what I mean, right Kaga-san?"

"E...eh, yes..."

"All right then, it’s decided! Let’s go!"

As if they were old friends, suddenly she took Kouko’s hand intimately. Visibly a bit surprised, Kouko looked down at her hand that was taken, but before she could open her well-formed lips to say something,

"Tiffany!?"

The upperclassman yelped. The sudden volume of her voice might have been overpowering: Kouko’s long eyelashes fluttered, her chin pulled back a bit.

"No way, no way, ehhh, that’s a super pretty ring! That’s a diamond, right!? Is it Tiffany!?"

"...Er, well, but... Somehow, I thought was a bit flashy for wearing to school, but, er, my hand..."

"Eh, why do you say!? It’s completely OK, it’s not overboard! It’s OK OK OK! I mean, it suits you incredibly well, and when I saw it not long ago I wanted one too! I mean, if I got one, I would absolutely wear it to school, and to work after school, you know? What’s the point of having it, if you don’t wear it! It's OK, let me see it closer, ah, it’s as pretty as I expected!"

Almost by brute force, in the position they were, she pulled Kouko after herself and off they went. "Maybe the upperclassman wants to grab my hand with the same force...", but Banri’s such worries were groundless. She simply called out to Banri, "Go out through the entrance over there!"

"Oh, don’t worry, it’s my treat! It's only natural since I'm the one wanting you to come with me! By the way, I can tell you anything I know about the lectures!"

...Could details about our lectures be going around even amongst other college’s students?

Banri was dumbfounded, but regrettably, if you were a lively new freshmen, as such, you had to accept such things.

"I can recall, when we were freshmen, the upperclassmen taught us this way too. Ah, I’ve somehow missed the bustling atmosphere of spring! The mood of the season, there’s something special in the air! Isn't it trembling with excitement?"

Yes, the air is trembling with excitement, you had to smile and nod back in that mood--- that's how it felt, so he did.

While the older girl pulled her by the hand, as if she were a little child, Kouko looked back towards Banri, who followed behind. With only that glance, even Banri understood that Kouko was confused. Banri was confused too. He was plenty confused. This upperclassman after her sudden appearance, gave him a strangely uncomfortable feeling. She was refreshingly cheerful, chatting away about this and that, but after all he couldn't really understand what was it that she wanted to say. He had no idea about where and for what reason was she dragging them along, to begin with.

"Well--- whatever. Let’s go see", Banri mouthed in response to Kouko’s look back at him, nodding a bit too.

Together with Kaga Kouko in a coffee shop, listening to what their upperclassman says. He had the feeling that he won't face such a curious situation ever again. Rare it was, rare. He would never have been able to casually invite her to tea by himself. Also this mysterious-like upperclassman was rather pretty.

Beside, and more importantly, this was Kouko’s first invitation to a club. This was the long awaited opportunity, so you might as well be open for it, thought Banri.

Of course, Banri didn’t know Kouko's real thoughts.

She was probably lonesome for real, this current situation where nobody called out to her was probably painful for her.

But that might be a lie, and she wasn't really lonely, she was only wearing that face, using that voice, all as part of a strategy to draw out Yanagisawa's schedule from Banri. If Yanagisawa wasn't in a club, being invited by them or not probably didn't matter. Being ignored by anybody but Yanagisawa probably didn't really matter for her.

But, if indeed he was being deceived, then so be it, Banri thought. Disliked and avoided by Yanagisawa, and with everybody else keeping their distance from her, the lonely Kouko with her downcast eyes was a pitiful sight. Whether it was a lie or the truth, as long as he saw Kouko like that, Banri's chest hurt.

He could live with being deceived. Banri wanted to do something about Kouko's loneliness, somehow. But, giving out Yanagisawa's personal information wasn't going to be part of it.

If that was the case, then he'd go along for this strange ride. Looking back occasionally to check whether Banri was coming along, as the upperclassman was pulling Kouko by the hand, they left the school building.

Thus by being invited to a club, by listening to the upperclassman, or even by visiting the club's invitation party, they could make new friends, setting aside whether they wanted to officially join the club or not. Peeking into another world, there might be something even for Kouko to gain.

You could call it selfish meddling, and it certainly is.

But, even if all this, as far as Kouko is concerned, is nothing more but unwanted selfish meddling, it's Kouko's own fault that she drew out the sympathy of a simple fool like me.

Anyway, for now, with everything he had, Banri set himself to rescue Kouko from her solitude.

Chapter 3

Tada Banri was talking on the telephone.

It was Saturday morning. The overly sunny station platform had few people on it, and nobody but Banri was sitting on the four-seat bench. Squinting like a dirty-looking old man in the bright sunshine, he went all the way to the very last seat to sit down. He set his small nylon sack down by his knees. I was standing by Banri's side, trying to stick my ear to the other side of his cellphone, by the transmit light.

He speed-dialed his mother, but in the middle of the first ring what came out of the telephone speaker was his dad. When Banri heard that voice, he flinched slightly. A little brusquely, he said, "I can't hear you well, hello hello, it's me, Banri." "Ah, oh", he could hear his dad answering in roughly the same brusque voice. "Mother?", Banri asked, and his father replied, "In the kitchen. Wait while I go get her." Speaking quickly to his father, Banri said, "No, that's fine. I'll be staying one day at the club training camp. That's all."

In front of the bench where Banri was sitting, in spite of it being Saturday, the suited forms of three salarymen were approaching. Banri panicked and lifted up the bag that was illegally occupying one of the seats, putting it on his lap.

"OK then, until next time I call!"

"Oh", answered his father, and quickly hung up, as if in a race to hang up the phone. From such a short conversation, Banri was suddenly exhausted. It was only his father, but even so it had been tense. He didn't understand why he should feel that way. Still, Banri wondered what his father must be thinking about after a call like that.

Or would his feelings be hurt, despite the distance?

Nonchalantly acting like he was combing his bangs, *Banri's cool!*, he snuck a look at the armpit of his T-shirt. Finding nothing changed, he smiled. Safe. He let out a sigh. The other night, suddenly his father was asking him over the phone, "What's up? What are you doing? Has nothing changed?", asking him all sorts of things. The next three minutes were worrisome. Awkwardly hanging up the phone afterwards, sweat had been running down his arm all the way to his elbow. The mysteries of the human body... while muttering such things to himself, kneeling on the floor, he was sticking layers of facial tissue in his cold wet armpits, three at a time. That was one miserable scene.

In the end, none of the three companions sat down at the bench, but rather amused themselves standing around and talking not far from Banri. Banri decided to put the bag he was holding back on the next seat. But one of the salarymen jerked... seemed to squirm, or maybe jumped when he picked up the bag again. But he didn't sit down. He wasn't about to sit, but rather it seemed he was only switching his briefcase from his right hand to his left.

Banri eventually put the bag back up on his lap, and once more opened up his cellphone. The train still hadn't arrived, and he hadn't received any texts from anybody. I took the seat next to

Banri, and together with Banri looked over at the small screen on the phone. Fiddling with the buttons little by little, he wrote a note.

My form is not seen, not by Banri, not by anybody. Not father, nobody here knows what I am doing.

Wham, at that moment, the bench suddenly shook hard. Banri's face snapped up. It had occurred to the three guys to all sit down at once.

Nobody in this world even noticed my existence.

* * *

"Kaga-saan"

It had just turned noon when they arrived at the main gate of the campus.

When she noticed Banri's hand waving, her beautiful face lit up, pale white like the moon in broad daylight. There weren't any lectures on Saturday, and there weren't any students in sight, so it was much quieter around than it was on weekdays.

"Good afternoon, Tada-kun"

"Did the older girl show up?"

"Not yet, it seems. Though the expected time is coming soon."

Kouko gracefully raised her slender wrist and looked at her delicate watch. Eyelids hidden by her long eyelashes, flickering transparently with a pearl-like sheen, Banri was completely captivated inside of ten seconds. Absolutely dumbstruck. Again today, Kouko was flawlessly beautiful.

An orange-colored one-piece silk dress wrapped in a large cardigan. High-heeled sandals with plenty of beads. Pretty toenails lined up and carefully painted beige. A small carry-case. In her pierced ears were brightly glittering diamond drop earrings. Banri had no idea what to make of her hair-style. Her hair was braided and wrapped loosely around her head, raising her bangs like a headband. One loose lock of hair softly escaped, curving down her neck, and even that looked like a carefully prepared accessory.

A perfect beauty, Kaga Kouko. And Banri liked beautiful people. He could declare that with pride.

Of course it was the right thing to come. While shyly smiling, he averted his eyes about five million light years from Kouko's face.

Having been invited by the upperclassman from **** Girl's College during yesterday's encounter, Banri and Kouko were going to participate in the 'All-Around Intercollegiate Club' to participate in a freshmen welcome outing.

From one day to the next, it was really sudden. You could probably say, in fact, that to Banri it was a puzzling development.

Yesterday the upperclassman had taken them to a café, certainly a crowded little place, but a good find, and then they'd been served café-au-lait in bowls. Drinking, he thought 'This is a café-au-lait bowl?', but it sure was cool! Agreeing on that point, even Banri kept up with the conversation.

Certainly after that, what started was a perfectly normal conversation about life as college students. Like getting all the language credits within the first year, you really ought to get a part time job, those that can get a girlfriend or boyfriend should be able to by the first year summer break, it's been difficult for any student to find a job this year, and so on.

Regardless of whether they were interested in the subject matter, her talk was inconsiderately long. Eventually having gotten tired, Banri was politely nodding yes to everything. Kouko looked like she had gotten tired too. Before Banri knew it, along with the already silenced Kouko, they got to where they just answered on demand, "Yessir", "Yes", "Is that so?" or laughed.

Before they noticed, three hours had passed. Completely surprised that outside the window it had gotten completely dark, "Then we'll meet tomorrow at the main gate, at twelve-fifteen, OK!", indicated for the first time that they were actually committing to *do* something.

So, if he remembered correctly--- every year the group held their new member meeting at a seminar house. Was that true? It was mentioned in the student pamphlet, why didn't he see that? A training facility in prefecture K. Weren't there some you could get to by two hours in car? If there wasn't too much traffic, that is. Leaving in the afternoon, arriving in the evening, with a big banquet for dinner. With a big bathtub afterwards, that would feel soo good. And so be ready for the next day. An active guy could play tennis through the morning, and then come back after noon. And because you're a freshman, of course there are no fees. It's OK, it's OK, take it easy, all of you guys are no problem. It was fun going out with me, don't ya think? Right? Will you decide to join? Aah, it's already so late, here and now, will you decide soon? It's all right, by participating, that's how we'll do it. Deciding would be good, don't you think? Right?

It must have been the mood of the conversation.

He peeked over at Kouko, and Kouko also looked over at Banri. This looks real, right? Reading each other's expressions and coming to an agreement, they finally nodded as one.

That'd be fun, we really should try it out, but really, I'm tired... I want to go home... if we say we'll participate we'll be able to leave... Banri was thinking such things. The senior didn't say anything, but wasn't going to let them refuse after three hours of meeting with them! Her attitude spoke it clearly.

Besides which, of course, there was Kouko.

Since this is the long awaited opportunity, they both thought, 'let's go!' They returned home tired so as to get time to rest. The idea of going with Kouko to take part in the training camp party was actually quite exciting.

Even knowing that Kouko was chasing after Yanagisawa, Tada Banri was a sensitive 19-year old young man. In such situations, his heart couldn't help but beat faster. A ton of difficulties overcome, one night's worth of things packed into the bag in his hand, there was no way he wasn't going on this outing.

"Hey, Tada-kun."

He didn't know why she lowered her voice, looking around and seeing fewer signs of life in the midst of the weekend, while Kouko whispered to him.

"About today, did you say anything to Mitsuo?"

With dark brown mascara applied liberally to her long eyelashes, her large eyes cast in shadow were beautiful.

"I told him! Told him, I mean, on the way here I sent him a text saying 'Kaga-san and I are leaving now, going together to a new member's training camp.'"

"...And Mitsuo?"

Pulling out his cellphone, it didn't seem a problem to show Kouko the contents of the text message. "You're kidding!? Where to!?", was the entire reply.

Kouko looked at it, then slowly looked up at Banri's face. Looking at him as if they conspiring together, she smiled happily, her lips beautifully painted rose-colored lines.

"Don't worry about it. It's my problem."

"Yes, so it is."

Rather than wanting to give advice, but rather simply wanting there to be more communication, Banri looked back at Kouko's eyes.

"Me, looking at this a proverb comes to mind. Listen up, it's a famous one. He who chases two rabbits..."

"Won't catch either, of course."

Now, what was that mood? With a sparkle in her serious, questioning gaze,

"...Sorry, I was making a mistake."

Confused, silently blinking over and over again, his brain wasn't fast enough to catch what was spinning around it.

"I was forgetting about today. Umm, that isn't it, rather this is. When it comes to men, whenever they are being chased, they want to escape. And when they escape it makes everybody want to chase them again, it seems like... doesn't it? Won't the rabbit... trip over a tree-stump? 'Wives and tatami mats and... tuna fish and... fresh leaves...? Put in the bowl...? Well blend...ed?' ...of course is nothing but a joke though... I mean, excuse me, I really wanted to say something that I didn't understand..."

"That's OK. It's enough explanation for now."

"You understood? Great! Well, that sort of thing. As for the rest, here,"

Banri, making hand signs by the side of his face about locomotives, looked cross-eyed.

"Mitsuoo! ...It's not that I thought it was getting better. Instead, quite the contrary,"

She was fluttering about, talking with her mouth while waving both hands and contorting her body in a way that called attention to herself.

"And so, just look, you've got me instead! ...And it seems to me that *Yana*-ssan wouldn't mind."

Banri was quite, or rather seemed to be a complete fool, or rather was an idiot indeed, but Kouko surprisingly seemed to agree, nodding her head strongly in the affirmative.

"It may even be as Tada-kun says. It's quite an accomplishment, seeing as Mitsuo does care where I'm going! ...Frankly, today, though for some reason I was reluctant to do this, now I am glad I came."

"Eh, hold on just a bit! If you suddenly changed your plans, that would have hurt. I'd be going to the drinking party alone."

"I don't think you'd have been alone. ...Those guys, aren't they freshmen? We may be going to the freshman training camp with them."

Her soft gaze looking past him, Banri subsided. Turning around, he noticed for the first time some other students standing around. Three guys, and three girls too. Or perhaps,

"Ah! Isn't that Mr. Two Dimensions?"

"Eh? You're kidding. Tada Banri?"

His acquaintance didn't fit in. Mr. Two Dimensions...? Despite his puzzlement with Kouko, Banri and the one guy gave each other a light punch. Met at a Tea Ceremony Club drinking party, so he was: Mr. Two Dimensions.

"Perhaps Mr. Two Dimensions is going to the freshman training camp too?"

"For sure! Though I'm surprised to see Tada Banri coming too. Is *Yana*-ssan a member too?"

"*Yana*-ssan isn't coming. Today rather I have with me Kaga Kouko-san. Kaga-san, this is Mr. Two Dimensions."

Kouko was being introduced to him, eh!? Ah! Mr. Two Dimensions, obviously shaken, suddenly took a big step back. "Well, me, you, Civil Law, I saw you, you were, are, Monday it was, second hour," he mumbled in a strange tone of voice, as if he were suspiciously reading the user's manual of a bootleg copy of *Pachimon*, he moved the upper part of his body around unsteadily.

Kouko in her way,

"Mr. Two Dimensions... your family name...?"

She wasn't speaking clearly. Banri said, "He can't understand you!" while grinning, and tapped Kouko lightly between the shoulder-blades.

"Mr. Two Dimensions is his nickname, in the Tea Ceremony Club party he despaired of three-dimensions, declaring from that time forth he would live for two dimensions! Right?"

Mr. Two Dimensions smiled and nodded through Banri's explanation. He averted his eyes from the three-dimensional Kouko, his shy face blushing. In front of Sao-chan and Shii-chan he'd shouted, "And that's why three-dimensions is bad! You're all strange! Idiots!", like a particle cannon spitting lemon sour, laughing uproariously, hardly seeming the same person.

As she watched Mr. Two Dimension's face, mumbling "I see, I see", Kouko could be seen with her mouth strangely pursed, and her head nodding slightly. Mr. Two Dimensions said, "Ah, you understood me?", feeling even more shy, fidgeting before the rather stylish tall figure, something Banri somehow understood.

But for Kouko nothing mattered, it seemed.

It could be Mr. Two Dimensions, Mr. Different Dimensions, Ijuuin-kun, or even Jigen Daisuke-kun. Or Tada-kun, Takata-kun or even Kaga-kun, it was all the same to her. As far as Kouko was concerned, only one thing mattered: "Mitsuo isn't here."

Setting aside her motives, whatever they might have been, and her laments of yesterday ("Why

doesn't anybody call out to me?"), for the moment she was clearly able to answer.

That, despite the fact that she didn't have interest in anybody apart from Yanagisawa Mitsuo!

"But, from here on out, you won't be able to get away with that!", Banri declared in his mind to Kouko's smiling face. Neither Banri nor Mr. Two Dimensions were simply creatures that weren't Mitsuo, and over the next two days and one night together with Kouko, participating in the training camp, they should be able to become "friends" instead.

"Er, well, whatever, we can talk with Mr. Two Dimensions too, right? The world's not all that bad a place."

Banri playfully tugged at the shirt sleeve of Mr. Two Dimensions, who was still mumbling, unable to look at Kouko's face.

"What's with you? Haven't you come back to three dimensions, it's a little late already, a little late."

"You're mistaken! Even in two dimensions, I've been wondering recently, it's something I've been thinking about! Even in two dimensions, I had thought I wanted to look for the ideal depiction, but of course, what I mean is, it was hard! But in the end, other people's creations were not 100% satisfactory, seems like! Why not just stop?"

"It's OK, it's OK, keep going."

"That so? Well then, especially of late, I've found myself getting deeply involved with a female character of my own creation. Creating the setting, drawing the pictures, coloring them, deciding the words she uses and how she says them, what her favorite food is, from the way we would date, becoming more and more intimate from one episode to another, becoming my *perfect* dream, ...hey, was it really OK to say this? Should I not have stopped?"

Kouko, who had been mumbling approving noises and nodding her head while ignoring what was being said, slowly stopped shaking her head. After a little while, it seemed the correct answer occurred to her, and with a 60W grin,

"A little more of that, and you'll be Mr. One Dimension!"

"What in the world are you saying, Kaga Kouko...", thought Banri.

A surprised snort escaped from one girl of a group of three standing not far from Banri's group. Little sports bags stuffed with rough-looking attire, denim and sneakers, they probably were going to the same freshman training camp as friends,

"Soorryy, this person, even if she looks like she does, can be really dumb at times."

Banri tried to point at Kouko as their smiling faces turned towards him. They seemed to be

group of friends, all three of them smiling as one while nervously stepping up. Kouko herself said, "Eh, dumb? Who?", looking back at Banri's face, wondering.

"Hello, I'm Tada Banri, and with me Kaga-san and Mr. Two Dimensions. Are all of you going to the freshman training camp from here?"

At the sound of Banri's voice, they saw for the first time the faces of two more guys, who joined them with slightly nervous expressions. At Kouko's 'Mr. One Dimension' exclamation, the girls looked around at everybody smiling, and started their introductions at once.

A car-horn sounded, three modest beeps. Everybody turned towards the street.

"Yes yes yesss! Sorry for being late, the cars are here so all aboard!"

The upperclassman came out to them from the first car parked by the side of the road.

Which reminded Banri that he had in fact failed to get her name--- which thing, of course, it was a little late to talk about now.

The club upperclassmen, together with some other freshman students, got into several rented station wagons.

An upperclassman handed a blank form to Banri, who was confused over which car to get into.

"Could all of you write their name, address and telephone number here? And if they are living away from home, then their parents' addresses too. This will be part of our insurance documents. It's because of our liability if anything happens at the training camp. Do it neatly, leaving out nothing. Everybody else is done writing their information. Yes, because you're Tada-kun, OK? This column, OK? I mean, even though this parking lot is rather noisy, and it's bad to be in such a hurry? Sorry about that, yes, hurry up, but read it carefully, it's just in case anything happens, OK?"

Insurance. Parking lot. Not fully understanding but unwilling to go against the social pressure, Banri the fool wrote down their personal information in a rush, but honestly. Passing the pen and the register to Kouko, she gracefully wrote down her name and address too, and passed it on to Mr. Two Dimensions.

And then, all the freshmen having signed the list, the upperclassman took her own bag and,

"Yes, thanks! You and you to the first car, OK? You over there. You that way. You and you get on that car at the end of the line. And now, you and you,"

Banri nudged Kouko's elbow and grinned.

"You're with me in that car, let's hurry up and get in!"

He opened the station wagon's door and they were greeted at once by a clear voice, saying "Hi there!". While Banri and Kouko returned the greeting, they sat down side by side in the middle.

"Okay, all the freshmen will be by the windows!"

The upperclassmen were rearranged, and everybody was able to be seated. An upperclassman got into the car right next to Banri.

"Today's weather turned out good, eh?"

With a smile, she sat down as if the spot belonged to her by right. In the front seat, the cool-looking guy next to Kouko said, "Nice to meet you, I'm a third-year from **** college."

All the freshmen that had been gathered from all the colleges were sitting separately by the windows. All of them, with nervous faces not speaking out. Banri and Kouko were in the same boat. For some reason the other seats were occupied by clear-voiced, smiling, laughing upperclassmen. It was somehow strangely uncomfortable, uncomfortable for sure, but they couldn't argue about it. The seating was arranged.

"Drinks and such are prepared if you'd like!"

"Ah, yes..."

Hanging from the neck of the smiling upperclassman to his side, a necklace with a snowflake design glittered. If he remembered correctly, she was wearing it yesterday too. It was probably her favorite. Casually looking over at the other upperclassman, just above his shirtcollar, Banri noticed he was wearing the same necklace. He wondered if they were really close, or if it was a uniform.

"Is everybody's seat belt on? Nobody needs the bathroom? Cause once we get on the freeway we have no plans to stop!"

The upperclassman in the driver's seat looked back. At his neck too, the same necklace. This guy having one on, even if it was so many close friends matching up, of course it seemed quite strange. Well of course! Does everybody in this club have to wear one? Banri discretely looked towards the necks of the other upperclassman in the vehicle.

"Why are you looking around like that?"

Suddenly asking the upperclassman with a straight face, "Isn't it strange that everybody's wearing matching necklaces? Just curious...", didn't get him an answer. She said, "It's nothing", giving Banri a vague deceptive smile, the station wagons lining up to leave. From where Banri sat, all he could see of Kouko was the billowing hair on the top of her head.

Inside the vehicle pop music was playing continuously and loudly, the upperclassmen singing in a sort of high-tension karaoke--- the first-years silent, strangely nervous still--- with things staying like that throughout the drive, which took about two hours.

Banri, once more attacked by uneasiness, was wondering if they shouldn't ought be getting off the freeway already when the time arrived.

The line of rental cars was passing in front of the university's seminar house. Following a road through the forest, a sign with the name of the college that Banri was attending was standing there, but they ignored it. What's more, the line of station wagons continued onwards into the mountains. Were they taking the wrong road, or perhaps, did the seminar house the upperclassman was talking about belong to another college?

That's what it looked like. None of the other freshmen at the windows, not even Kouko, noticed. Nobody said anything. While watching the sign get further away the other side of the window, should I keep quiet? Perhaps we're really going the wrong way, and if so what should we do? He couldn't decide whether they should turn around at that moment.

He noticed that the upperclassman gave him a sharp glance when he looked at the sign through the window. With the loud music flowing through the inside of the car, they had stared at each other for all of three seconds. As it was, realizing that the strange silence was dragging on, he boldly decided to ask her.

"Welll... didn't we just pass the seminar house?"

"Eh? What?"

Putting her hand to her ear, she indicated that she hadn't heard him.

"Just now, the seminar house, didn't we pass it!?"

He spoke louder and clearer this time, moving his mouth closer to her ear to overcome the music. The smell of her hair went up his nose, strangely unnatural and strong.

"What, what!? Eh, I can't hear you! I can't hear you at all! I mean, stop it already, this is embarrassing! Cut it out!"

While smiling, she firmly pushed Banri back, putting her weight into it. And then suddenly, she said, "What's with me? Am I getting a little sleepy already?", and put her head on Banri's shoulder. Her upturned eyes at point blank range, lips coming together in a slight pout.

When he couldn't react, she casually placed her hand on his knee. The palm of her hand, slowly but steadily warming up, inched around as if to fondle him. While drawing circles, it came creeping towards his thigh. While so doing, she gazed moistly at Banri's eyes. She said, "Are you happy? Did I make your heart race? Did I make you hope?", while she gave him a look full of self-confidence.

But, distinctly scary. Her soft chest pushing against his elbow, Banri pulled away from her as softly as he could. A boy with a girl close by, whatever the situation might be, would be happy. That she even thought that way was scary, but more importantly, what if what she was doing up to this point wasn't a trick? That by itself was frightening.

But those innermost thoughts of Banri's became irrelevant as the line of cars slowed down, left the trees and turned from the beautifully paved private road and then entered what was apparently a driveway. To the left and right, high concrete walls were built, forming a C-curve in front, attached to the roof all the way down to the driveway.

Where they had arrived wasn't particularly big, but judging by the brickwork, it was evidently a pretty nice facility, two buildings set side by side.

Urged by the upperclassmen, they got down out of the cars. The older girl tried to join hands with Banri, reaching out for him, but Banri pretended not to notice, calling out "Kaga-saan!" and trotting, chasing after Kouko, who had walked ahead, in order to escape from the her. As soon as Kouko saw Banri's face, she stopped walking and they stood side by side, and in a whisper,

"Ah, I was able to talk to somebody I barely knew. The upperclassman next to me, he just kept talking to me the whole time... It wasn't boring, but I became somewhat worn out... How was it for you?"

"As for me..."

He'd touched somebody that way in public. No, rather, he had been touched that way in public. But he couldn't talk about that, not with Kouko.

"...Same here. I'm a bit tired too."

Banri also answered quietly. Before he realized it, a crowd of freshmen had formed. The upperclassmen surrounded them, pushing the freshmen towards an opening, keeping up with them as they walked into the facility. They had no choice but to walk together in a line.

Marble used all over the place, even the entrance polished to a wonderful sheen, here and there decorated with big moth orchids, it really seemed more like a hotel, or an art museum. Pulling her carryall while going inside, to Kouko it seemed strange to have so much room.

"By the way, are we sure this place is really the college's seminar house? Would they have something as nice as this while their school buildings are falling apart?"

"...I don't think so..."

"Eh?"

Once all the freshmen had entered, a strange high sound arose and the entrance door closed. Shortly, in that darkened lobby, the lights were turned on.

In the center there glittered a huge piece of artwork, shaped like a snowflake.

On the pedestal a gold plate was affixed, inscribed with 'The Shape of God in our Times'. That god would be incarnated a million years from now! ---In other words, for the next five hours until they locked their rooms, Banri knew they would be subjected to a lecture.

* * *

Of course, he wanted to flee.

In short, they had been placed under house arrest by a new religion disguised as a club. But he couldn't talk with his fellow freshmen, as they were under a constant guard. They struck anybody who even looked like he was talking! It was such a low class thing to do, and some freshmen opened their mouths in protest, but the older students separated anybody who did so. For the moment the uneasy freshmen trying to gather together were kept apart, gently perhaps, but physically separated. Talk amongst the freshmen was not permitted; that was the message clearly being sent.

Before the lecture, everybody's bags were collected, tossed into a single room and locked up. At that point, strangely enough, they were permitted to get out their cellphones, but, whether it was from being in the middle of the mountains, or it was on purpose, Banri's cellphone wasn't the only one with no signal. There was not a phone in sight, so getting in contact with the outside was going to be difficult.

Dinnertime was completely silent, a sort of prayer ritual. Even a funeral would have been more exciting.

On little tables arranged in a semicircle there were placed glasses of cold beer and various kinds of soft drinks. As far as that went, this was an ordinary club training camp, quite so, no, perhaps of a rather extravagant type, but the freshmen were scattered about, kept apart, and everyone who understood the situation was keeping ominously quiet about it.

Banri was seated at the end of the semicircle. Next to him was the older girl. Kouko, from one of the center seats, looked vaguely down at the tables, her white face still blank. Occasionally, she would glance quickly at Banri, each of them seeing in this situation "Danger...!", both of them recognizing it, but neither of them able to do anything about it. Mr. Two Dimensions, too, on the other side could be seen with his head bowed.

Really and truly, it had become something dangerous.

"Now then everyone, let's get moving! Everybody, take your glasses!"

The hot upperclassman seated next to Kouko stood up and raised his voice for no apparent reason. Even some of the other upperclassmen whistled and booed at the sudden, unnaturally forced enthusiasm.

"Well then! Congratulations for the newly created children, tonight's excellent full moon, and another gathering recorded for the next 10,000 years! Ready, cheers! Hello new children!"

"Hello!", the upperclassmen said, raising their glasses.

Banri and the other freshmen, all of them, were looking down at their knees, petrified. The tops of their heads could be seen lined up around the semicircle.

Almost as if he were praying silently, "What should I do?", an over-familiar touch at his shoulder,

"What's wrong, new children! Loook, at long last the day of your awakening is here! Let's have a little more enthusiasm!"

With a smile as wide as her face, she raised her glass. Banri's head going numb to the core, he was unable to answer anything more, and he stared at the golden liquid which filled the glass. He remembered something strange. The day of the entrance ceremony, at the convenience store, when he met Yanagisawa at the mirror, they'd toasted with ice-bars. At that time, they were completely mismatched though somehow it was really fun. In the few days since then, they'd come surprisingly far. He could hardly wait for those peaceful times to return.

As it was, Banri was already thinking about how they couldn't keep them there too many days. Come Monday there would be school, a few freshmen vanishing would become a big deal, maybe even a matter for the police.

So anyway for this one night and two days, perhaps he could have the patience to let it pass by. Quickly getting drunk, quickly getting smashed, just sleeping through it all, morning would come soon enough.

"..."

As if.

Anyway, if he quietly kept his patience until tomorrow in this weird place--- glass full of beer in her hand, she looked at Banri,

"Yes, yes! It was really fun winning! Yes, one round, cheeeers!"

"Ch, cheers..."

Giving another cheery smile, she gulped down the delicious looking beer.

Kouko was looking his way with a startled look on her face. She was putting the chilled glass to her mouth, since she couldn't avoid doing so, but she looked back at Banri, her feelings exposed.

But--- was that so?

If he were to think about it, he was responsible for the fact that she had been brought here.

He'd answered the upperclassman, saying, "Let's go together!", he told himself. Nonetheless, Kouko was confused.

Besides, it would have been better to have chatted some more back at the coffee shop. Caught as they were, if he thought about it now, it was suspicious. Wasn't it written in plain sight? This time for sure, he had to be on guard about the strange upperclassman who stuck too close for comfort. Even so, his nervousness at finding himself together with Kouko, his hopes of being able to be friends with her, everything combined to blind his radar.

Since they'd decided to come and participate in the training camp, he'd been dumb. Exhausted, unable to think and with his judgement lost, if he so much as nodded it would be over, and... swept away, to such a state he'd been brought. And now, he was regretting it to death.

Banri considered not swallowing the beer touching his mouth.

Of course, he couldn't.

Already, he wouldn't do things like that.

If he had been patient enough while they'd been speaking of such things, maybe they wouldn't have gone so far. From the beginning, the purpose of isolating the training camp, wearing out its participants, making them give up, stopping their thought processes, appeared to be a trap.

And then... no, no way, they can't just brainwash me when I don't understand what they're teaching, he thought. Still, Banri looked sidelong at the upperclassman next to him. He started drinking the delicious beer, eating their cooking and talking with the other upperclassmen.

Actually, surrounded by unusually good looking and healthy seeming guys and gals, the danger hadn't really sunk in.

If he didn't want to become like them, if he even wanted to live in ordinary reality, he needed to escape from here. Absolutely. Banri spit out the beer he held in his mouth into the damp towel provided on his table.

But, he was worried about that roster he'd signed, where they'd hurried him to write down his personal information. Kouko, himself and all the rest too, they had been perhaps too foolishly honest when they'd written down their addresses and contact information. Wasn't that what all the persistent nagging was all about?

He absolutely, absolutely couldn't give Mom and Dad back home anything more to worry about.

That roster had been placed in the upperclassman's own duffle. And then together with the freshmen's luggage, now, it was locked up in a room.

What should I do?

"...This is no fun! We can't do anything like this!"

Suddenly, crash! At the sudden, high, echoing sound, Banri lifted his face. Mr. Two Dimensions had thrown his glass to the floor.

"What's this about 10,000 years in the future! Giving thanks to a crystal master! How messed up can you be, believing in a three-dimensional thing like that!? You've been tricking us from the start, calling this an 'all around club'! I mean, isn't this imprisonment!? Isn't that a crime!? Do you even think anybody could keep quiet about people doing such things!?"

Decisively stated by Mr. Two Dimensions, the other freshmen stood up too.

"Let's go out to the cars now! I don't want to stay in this place any longer!"

"I'm going to sue them!"

Not knowing yet what he should do, Banri stood anyway. At that moment, in the fragments of glass scattered about broken on the floor, for just an instant, just how many broken reflections of himself were there to be seen?

Aspects of himself could be seen in all of them.

A worn out face. A scared face. An angry face. A face trying hard. A face ready to cry. So many variations of his face. And then suddenly a look that seemed to ask, "What are you going to do, Tada Banri?" At such a time as this, Tada Banri, what should a guy be doing?

Tada Banri ---

"Everybody, such an outburst wasn't called for. Just calm down for now."

--- realized he ought to do something.

The upperclassmen, seated in a row, showed no surprise. They were all watching Mr. Two Dimensions' composed smile, Banri's raised voice and the state of the other freshmen. It had all been arranged for, even this situation. This 'facility in the mountains' was their place of power, and what with the talk of their planning to make an offering, Banri was rather scared. But he couldn't do more than that, since nothing had been decided. He had no other choice for now.

Himself, he would do something unexpected.

"Anybody who wants to go home, that's fine if they do."

While he was talking, his body was trembling. Hiding it, he continued, "But I don't want to go back."

"What are you saying, Tada Banri!?"

Mr. Two Dimensions looked at Banri's face as if in shock. Kouko did too. Eyes opened wide, standing up. At the same time the table shook, tipping the glasses over. Shaking off their glances, Banri suddenly raised his voice.

"I mean, frankly, that where until things were so tense, now you're talking about it being boring! Just what is it you can't spit out? You speak of crime, but, even though recently you were still underage, you were drinking! Drinking underage at the Tea Ceremony is a crime, but you didn't speak of that! Seems the same to me. If you could let things like that slide, then maybe you can have fun here! It's convenient to ignore it, say it's not a crime, but isn't that really selfish? Such a bothersome guy you are, even entering here you are such an annoyance!"

Mr. Two Dimensions tried to interrupt, but he was prevented by a loud voice.

"Anyhow I want to have some fun here! Speaking of such boring things is tiresome, it's annoying! Sirs, these guys are clearly a bother! Since they want to go home, can't they just leave? Kick out these bothersome ones, and then let's get to the drinking party! I came here to have some real fun!"

He took revenge for her public assault on him.

Grabbing the older girl's hand, he shook back and forth like a little kid. But, his opponent being a master of the same techniques, she looked back at Banri, her eyes wary.

"...Do you really want to stay here? Even if everybody else returned? That so, eh? But, why would you?"

"I was quite impressed by the lecture I heard."

The last words shook, but that probably made it seem more truthful.

"In perfect seriousness, I would like to hear what the other upperclassmen here have to say. What I mean, really,"

He ordered his knees to stop shaking.

"Actually, I was seriously injured in high school, and all my memories were blown away. I've suffered amnesia, so to speak. I have suffered much from that. When I woke up, I suddenly knew nobody else in all the world. Not parents, nor friends, nor acquaintances nor anybody else. It was really lonely. But now... with the lecture about this new world to come, at last it looked

like I may be saved. Though it sounds like it may be a lie, this, isn't something you made up. If here and now, there were a police investigation, or a hospitalization, I wouldn't receive an explanation nor would there be a meeting. In truth why"

Through his hair, the older girl could see the ugly scar still present on his scalp. The marks from surgery spread down to the neck of his T-shirt, running down even to his shoulders. He wondered if he ought to pull down his blue-jeans to show them the long stitch-scars running down his thighs to the knees.

"...That's enough. Forgive us for being suspicious, new children. ...That hurt, didn't it...!"

This is powerfully persuasive. What's going on here?

Looking at the point of tears, the older girl was looking at Banri sympathetically. She believed what he was saying just now.

"But you're all right now! You've cheered up, haven't you? Since you've cheered up, the time of your salvation has come, now! Right, everybody! From this it's been made clear, don't you think! The new children should be awakened, and the Crystal Lord will grant them their test, to see if they cannot be awakened! Going so far beyond, isn't it a beautiful thing? This time around, those who are only half-hearted kids will be able to go home. Only the real Children ought to have time close to me, as far as I'm concerned!"

They exchanged glances, those upperclassmen--- or you might say, the believers, that seemed to be the right word.

They spoke quickly, now it had been decided. The luggage that had been stored was taken out at once, and all the freshmen and some of the believers left the dining room. Banri saw that the keys to the luggage room were in the hands of one guy.

Opened with the key, the freshmen went inside to pick up their luggage. A guy stuck to Banri's side, mouth shut, trying to look thoroughly scary, keeping an eye on him sidelong.

But Mr. Two Dimensions was different.

"Let's just go back! Tada Banri! Go back with the rest of us! A place like this is always trouble! You can take your time listening to their talk later, but for now let's go back!"

Thanking him in his mind, Banri outwardly ignored him. He called out to the guy with the key.

"Ma'am, isn't drunken driving dangerous? If there were an accident it'd be a problem, for sure. It seems to me that it'd be better if the guy who's going to drive didn't drink."

"That too is true. Is there anybody that has a driver's license?"

At the sound of the guy's voice some of the freshmen raised their hands. Mr. Two Dimensions

was one of them. Casually, Banri called out to the guy's back, "Ah, I'll go get the key", intending to grab the key to the room. But,

"We've only just called you, but after you've been verified it'll be OK. You there, you've not had even one drop to drink?"

The key was quite firmly in the guy's grip. He let out an involuntary click of the tongue.

The guy locked up the luggage room and swung around. He thought better of calling after the guy with the keys to come back at that point. It couldn't be helped. There would be other opportunities to do something.

It looked like they'd decided that Mr. Two Dimensions and another freshman would be driving. Mr. Two Dimensions looked back towards Banri over and over again while going towards the entrance. It's OK, leave me behind, you're as confused as anybody else. Banri gave him a slight shake of the head.

Like that, all the freshmen left the facility. Amongst them of course, there went Kouko pulling her carry-all. Soon, the sound of the wheels rolling faded away, leaving Banri behind by himself.

Everybody had left. Amongst believers in a strange god, he was completely alone.

He was feeling scared to death. But, that was fine, he thought. At the least, he was able to get Kouko, whom he had brought here, back out to the ordinary peaceful world. Later, he would decide just what to do.

But, at that moment came to his ears a sound he could hardly believe. Banri reflexively cleared his ears. He had thought he might be hearing things, but apparently it was real.

The rolling sound that should have been gone, and had indeed left, was once more coming towards him.

Then, the entrance door opened.

Suddenly coming into view,

"Of course, I stayed behind too. The last lecture left me with a strong impression."

"...Kaga, san...!?"

"Hello, new children!"

With a self-satisfied expression on her face, Kaga Kouko.

Whether I like it or not, you, what are you saying--- really, what are you doing!? What the heck are you saying!? Precisely what are you doing!? Why have you returned!? What's with this

person!? Can she really be an idiot!? Banri would have shouted, but he had no voice.

Banri was completely dumbfounded, looking at Kouko's form in amazement, his mouth hanging open. Kouko was standing next to Banri, meeting all the believers halfway, her face composed, both her long hands precisely positioned before her slim body, her head tilted a little to the side. And then,

"In spite of being beautiful, I am not popular. Because of that, I have already abandoned this century. I am longing for the new century!"

Strangely persuasive, she smiled with perfect grace.

The freshmen gone and Banri and Kouko left behind, the strange party atmosphere returned to the dining hall. Nearly an hour had passed.

All the believers themselves good and drunk, the opportunity to talk with Kouko had finally arrived.

He pointed over at Kouko's carry-all, still set in the corner of the dining hall. Since it needed to be put in the luggage room, it should be easy to get the guy to hand him the key.

"Kaga-san, let's go put away your luggage."

Grabbing the handle of the carry-all, winking back when he called her, Kouko stood up at once. Banri had a hunch that if the older girl had been looking towards them at all, it would have been very conspicuous. Unnoticed, he left the dining hall with Kouko.

While walking quickly down the corridor, Kouko started to call out to him, but Banri held a finger up before his mouth in a sign for her to be quiet. Still quiet, he took Kouko by the arm, looked all around to make sure nobody was nearby, and brought her over by the men's bathroom. Kouko was now at the mercy of his intentions, whatever they were. They quietly stuffed themselves into a stall and locked it. Up to this point, he'd been acting rather like a confirmed molester, but,

"...Aaa...!"

The first thing that escaped was a groan neither breathing nor sigh. In the narrow space, Banri's body was twisted like a music conductor, his right hand raised overhead and scratching his forehead roughly. "What are you doing, what are you doing, why, why, why, what's with youuu...!?", he shouted in a whisper while stamping the ground in frustration.

"Kaga-san, what were you doing!? Why didn't you go back with everybody else!?"

Really, come to your senses! He wanted to slap her on the cheek, grab her by the neck of her

pretty one-piece dress and shake her back and forth. Failing that, he could punch the wall, or maybe hit himself on the forehead. Since he couldn't do either, the upper half of Banri's body was twisted up like a grilled squid.

"Do you really want to join up with those guys!?"

He pointed his finger at Kouko's pretty face.

"That, was my line."

A gentle whack, and that fingertip was shot down.

Carefully lifting the hem of her skirt so it wouldn't touch the edge of the toilet, so close together in the narrow stall their knees overlapped, Kouko looked intensely back at Banri. The black pupils of her eyes were turned up like crescent moons.

"Tada-kun, all that stuff you said about rescue and such, was that true?"

"I...have...no...i...de...a...!"

He didn't say any more, at his wit's end, writing in agony while she smiled at him. In spite of his success in getting everybody sent back, how, why, and more importantly for what reason, had she come back?

"Oh... whatever, that's good... Tada-kun, I was wondering if you would really become a believer."

"But I was thinking it was time for you to go back!"

"But, it sounded sincere."

"It was for your sake... something, very real feeling... I mean, Kaga-san, why did you really come back? All that effort was so everybody could go home!"

"Because, I couldn't just leave you behind. Thinking of how you had followed them into thinking you were seriously planning on staying here, what would I do? I would feel responsible if you'd done such a thing, and would never be able to leave it behind!, so to speak. By all means, Tada-kun ought to be able to go back too, was my thought. Why was Tada-kun going to be left by himself, behind?"

"I didn't think they would let people go back just because they said they wanted to return! I pretended to believe, thinking that if everybody else made enough noise begging to return, they would let them go! Besides, there was all sorts of stuff written in that roster... addresses, contact information and so on. I thought that perhaps being left behind, I might somehow or other clean up things. I can't imagine how much trouble we'd have if that information got out."

Looking up at Banri's face, somewhat taken aback, Kouko in that moment placed her fingertip under her pretty rose-colored lips.

"...For sure. I had written down my parents' address in full."

"I saw the upperclassman girl stick it in her bag. There hasn't been time to make copies, now if we could get it out of there... that could be difficult."

With a jingle, the key to the luggage room could be seen in Kouko's hand.

"Thanks to Kaga-san having returned so miraculously, we go to Plan B. Seems like we may be able to set it in motion."

Kouko's eyes glittered like stars. In reality, it was just the reflected light from the restroom.

"Tada-kun..., ...good job."

Her eyes shining, Kouko applauded Banri with just her fingertips.

"Shall we do this together?"

"Of course."

"Let's both return absolutely quietly."

"Naturally!"

Nodding to each other, they took her carry-all and left the restroom.

They went down the corridor and opened the door to the luggage room with the key. They both went inside. Turning on the light, they searched through the upperclassmen bags, which had been lined up along the wall. Was it beige, ...no, was it brown? And so, he looked for anything like a girl's overnight bag in the hill in front of them, when suddenly at the confused Banri's side,

"Her bag was Coach. The Signature, last year's model, the keyholder had a marguerite..."

Kouko, her fingertip like a gun barrel, zeroed in right away on a single bag.

"It's that one."

What a capable helper! It seemed they would be able to easily clear this mission. Banri and Kouko jumped to pull out the upperclassman's bag, and fish through the contents.

They soon found the roster stuck in a file. Two sheets of A5 paper. Taking it quickly to tear it up, Banri was lost for a moment as to what to do with it. Could he hide it in his pants and take it back with him? Should he shred it up fine and flush it down the toilet?

From the arrangement of the things in the luggage room, it was probably a smoking lounge. On a low table somebody's lighter, and in an ashtray some cigarette buts had been left behind. He was casually looking over those things when suddenly,

"You there, what the heck--- huh!?"

The door opened, the forgotten key still in the lock. Glimpsing the white face of the upperclassmen girl, Banri and Kouko both jumped about an inch off the floor. Their bodies reacted even quicker than their thoughts.

"What's going on!? What about the roster... wa, wait!"

Banri fairly flew at the door, attacking it, forcing the door shut against the rest of the upperclassmen and locking it. The others banged on the door with terrific force. "What do you call this!?" "Open up!" "This traitor!" "Wait, somebody's coming!" The upperclassmen's loud voices echoed. The hand holding the door was shaking, and he realized that sweat was pouring from every pore of his body,

"Waah, wh wh wh, what am I going to do...!? This is bad bad bad...!"

Banri's face was now completely white. Should he kneel before them? Offer them money? Persuade them with tears? Such things, up to surrender, were starting to pass through his head, while on the other hand Kouko,

"Tada-kun, the roster."

With a strangely serious face, she held out her hand towards him without hesitation. He threw the tightly folded roster towards that hand. *Smack*, she caught it magnificently,

"Hold the door steady!"

Even in that moment, she was seating herself regally on a cushion. Then, without hesitation, she tore the roster up in pieces, put the pieces in an ashtray and quickly set it on fire with the lighter. Just like that, a little flame arose, and in a couple of seconds their worries about the roster turned to ashes. Finally, pouring some water that had been left behind in a cup over the embers put it out completely. Banri was amazed at how neatly it was done, at least on this occasion. How should he say it? To her enemies, she wasn't the type you'd want to turn your back on.

Kouko immediately opened up her carry-all, pulled out her wallet, cell phone and key-case, and stuffed it all in the pocket of her cardigan.

"Tada-kun, any valuables?"

"Ne, never carry any!"

The pounding on the door continued. An ominous creaking sound was coming from around the

door knob. They could hear the sound of a large number of people running up the corridor. Banri's valuables were his cell phone, wallet and the key to his place. Those he put in his jean's pocket, tied up in a leather strap that *Yana*-ssan had chosen for him in Kouenji.

"Can we leave the rest of the baggage?"

"Yes!"

They nodded to each other. From the other side of the door a key--- the master key, probably, the sound of it being inserted could be heard at the same time. The door opened. Angry voices echoed.

He feverishly grabbed Kouko's hand and rushed towards the window. This room was on the first floor, but,

"..."

He quickly ran to the window to look through it, it wasn't all that high, but still every cell in his body trembled in fear. His body didn't remember the terror it once had tasted. But if they remained here, things were going to get scarier still. Not just for himself, but for Kouko too. Suppressing their fears with reason, closing their eyes they abandoned themselves to the pull of gravity. Still holding Kouko's hand, they clumsily fell down together. Once they got back on their feet, they realized just how bad the slippers they had put on were, but they couldn't do anything about it.

While hearing loud cries of "They're escaping through the window!" from the mob behind them, Banri and Kouko ran out into the deep dark of the forest night.

* * *

Perhaps they had been a bit too reckless in the moment of their escape.

"Why... can't I get a signal...?"

"I can't get one either..."

After two hours had passed, both Banri and Kouko were becoming aware that they had new problems.

Their reward for escaping from the suspicious new religion, quite simply said, was to be stranded--- the path they were walking down right now, it might really be a road, or maybe just a

game trail, even that much they did not know. Without a map, flashlight nor even shoes, having only determination, they depended on what little light came through between the trees to continue on.

Naturally, it was dark, at night with all kinds of trees growing thickly over the mountain trail, and underfoot it was awfully wet. Sliding in the slippery mud, many times the protruding rocks kept them from their way. Fearing pursuit, they stayed away from the brighter lit roads, Banri choosing to follow the trackless paths of the forest.

Beyond the trees shone a line of lights, they had to be street lights. Those lights were a simple guide to get down the slope, but right now he wasn't sure whether or not it was the right thing to do. Since they led upwards into the mountains, he thought it would be better to go down, and did so. The line of streetlights seemed far away, and a difficult climb... he had a hunch about it.

Before long, they came to a sudden slope they couldn't cross in their awful slipper-shoes, so for the time being they started walking along the flat winding edge of a cliff, but in the end, they reached the end of their endurance.

Sitting down wherever they could on some fallen tree,

"I thought we'd come a good ways down..."

"For sure. Why haven't we reached the bottom..."

Phew..., hah..., together they let out a long sigh.

Seeing that as usual the screen showed no signs of a signal, Banri put his cellphone in his pocket.

It was already past 10 o'clock at night. It was late for local hunters to be passing by, and it was too early for the morning to break.

He thought about what he would do if only the cellphone were usable. He was thinking that if he could get in contact with Mr. Two Dimensions, or his home, or perhaps the police, he could tell them what was going on. And yet how, they were out of range. 'Build a bigger antenna!', but in such a place as this he couldn't do anything but curse the telephone company.

All their strength gone, it was as quiet as if they were falling to the ground. Falling and tumbling next, our anxieties, fears, despair... no, we can't. Banri lifted his face.

Still, it was 10 o'clock. It was too early to give up and fall into depression. Showing an unreasonably cheerful face, he took off his open-necked UNIQLO shirt and put it on Kouko's shoulders, which had only a cardigan over a thin dress. Though it was already covered with mud,

"Put these on?"

He tried to take off his socks and hand them over. It would have been good if he'd noticed a little sooner. Her feet were definitely bare. However, without putting them on, nor returning them, she gazed at him, in the same pose as when she received them.

Her messed up hair clinging to her cheeks, she wasn't bothering now to cover things up with a smile,

"Tada-kun"

Somewhat in a daze, Kouko turned an empty face towards Banri.

"What what what, it's OK! We'll manage somehow soon. A little rest and then we try some more!"

"I'm sorry."

"'I'm sorry'..."

He had been apologized to.

And what timing, Kouko's bangs, which were up, suddenly with a thud fell down, covering half her face.

"...Teacher of moonlight..."

Her laughter had returned.

Kouko was quiet for a bit, jerkily combing up her drooping bangs. Accustomed to doing it by hand without a mirror, from her mussy hair she quickly pulled out a pin and stuck it in her mouth, then using both hands as combs she skillfully fixed up her hair, and finished it off with the pin she'd taken out earlier. The messed up hair was fixed for the time being, and she'd returned to being like Kaga Kouko again, a bit. Then,

"It's my fault that things turned out this way."

Looking away from herself again, she looked straight at Banri once more. Being prettily put back in order, indeed with a serious frown, "I'm sorry," she repeated once again. Even in this moment, her large eyes were flashing darkly.

"...That's not right. 'It wasn't Kaga-san's fault', saying such things."

Without caring about how Banri was squirming,

"It was my fault! In the first place, I had the leaflets from that strange club, and they called me too. You thought that I was such a poor thing, going alone, so it was just to keep me company."

"...But I wasn't thinking it was your fault."

"That's wrong!"

"I thought it would be good if Kaga-san could make some friends in that club. Therefore, in spite of the strange feeling they gave me, I stopped worrying about it, and I instigated Kaga-san with, 'it's OK', 'let's go'. Therefore, it's my responsibility, of course."

"That's not right, that's wrong. ...You're just wrong!"

Shaking her head, frantically looking anywhere else, Kouko held on tightly to Banri's socks, with their unknown state of cleanliness.

"Really, it isn't your fault. ...I approached you and got close to you, thinking to trick you into giving me information about Mitsuo. From the start, which club didn't matter. Saying 'I haven't been invited to anything' was true. All the college students were already ignoring me, really. I was even aware of the gossip. But I didn't pay any attention. Yesterday, saying 'nobody calls out for me', forcing myself to look dejected, saying so, ...that was all just to draw out your sympathy."

"That so? Of course, it was all about *Yana*-ssan."

"Yes, about Yanao.... all mixed up. Mitsuo's"

Breathing out a bit, Kouko cast her eyes down uncomfortably and looked down at her own feet. Mud was all over her bare feet and slippers.

"It was all for the sake of Mitsuo."

The voice that followed was like a monologue, echoing in the silence,

"...Well, ninety percent."

Kouko raised her face once more.

She looked into Banri's eyes. Still holding the dirty socks tightly, speaking as somebody who made a mistake, her lips twisted in irony.

"The remaining ten percent... even I don't understand."

Tired of talking after that, her next breath was a like a gasp. Her gaze trembled.

"...Understanding, since the coming of this spring until yesterday, that there was only one person who bothered to speak with me. Only Tada-kun. Tada-kun called out to me, though it was news about how Mitsuo being excessively defiant... but, even though I found it hard to understand... you talked to me, ...and I was happy for that. That too is true."

"If so, then of course trying to call out to you was good."

Kouko held her tongue, looking at Banri's eyes while shaking her head softly. Not understanding that gesture very well,

"The result has been problems, though."

She tried to laugh it off, but couldn't. Kouko smiled a little, but the conversation did not continue.

The two stayed silent for a little while, gazing at each other's feet. Today having been spring, the temperate had been good and warm. Though it was chilly now, there was no worry about freezing to death.

"...I wonder what Mitsuo's doing about now? Is he worried at all about me?"

She tried to make it sound like a joke, but a little awkwardly, let it fall into the night darkness. Banri scooped it up, returning her words as lightly as possible.

"He might be. 'Where's the training camp?', I was asked later, but I didn't answer."

"Was that so?"

"Well, I could have texted from the car, but I didn't feel like it. And what's more, since afterwards we were always out of range, wouldn't he be rather worried? So it is, there it is, and before long, that anxious feeling unexpectedly becomes a hot possessiveness, a heaviness sitting on *Yana*-ssan's heart..."

Hearing Banri's little joke, a smile clearly broke across the well ordered features of Kouko's face.

"Enough. That's not right. You're making things up."

Indeed, just like her, even in smiling she seemed to be plotting something too perfect. He realized that it had been a long time since he'd seen that face. Cheered, Banri too smiled broadly.

"*Yana*-ssan noticed, you know. From what I see, that childhood friendship must have been important."

"Yes, yes yes! What about it?"

"There were already gloomy thoughts... even doubts like, 'Am I a stalker?'...! It was, but wait! As far as I'm concerned, of course it's my fate to be married to this girl! 'Kuoukuoooo---------!'"

"Kyaa! Muitsuuo---------!"

The two were messing around, laughing their heads off in the sultry dark, reaching their hands

out towards each other. Banri his right hand, Kouko her left. Building into a sudden and strange excitement, they made a lot of noise, their extended hands unable to reach each other, no matter what...! That was how they were playing together.

"You're messing up my entrance! Ugyaa! Kaagaasaan! Yaanaasaan!"

"Ahahaha! Taadaa-kuuuun!"

The fingertip of his left hand trembling fearfully, it neared Kouko's extended fingertip, approaching through the dark night air. But of course, since it was all a joke,

"Such an act, Baan!"

Taking the charade to its end, with Banri as "Mitsuo", Kouko clapped her hands and let them fall. Kyaaa, Kouko's hands sketched a big arc as they came down. Flutter flutter flutter, plop, with a sad sound the rotten tree to her side fell. Kouko laughed for a little bit, then,

"...Eh, wasn't that awful just now?"

All of a sudden she looked at Banri seriously. It wasn't that bad, since it was all a joke, she shook her side from side to side.

"I was referring to the socks. You ought to put them on."

He prompted her with a jerk of his chin.

It looked like Kouko finally remembered about Banri's socks, which were still sitting in her lap. Bending over, she put them on. They could serve to protect her slipper-clad bare feet from getting dirty, at least. Seeing that, Banri nodded in approval.

Though outwardly Kouko seemed lonely, it was after all ninety-percent a pretense to "Get Yana!" Even hearing this from her, he wasn't upset. Was this because he expected such from her? Was it because "it doesn't matter", and he was suddenly rebellious? Was it because, following the "there's no sick child" formula, his "good man" circuit got switched on? Was it simply because with things being the way they were at the moment, his emotions were simply paralyzed? Or perhaps this was just another proof of Yanagisawa's theory that "For beautiful people, life is fun" --- was he being led around by the nose by the beautiful Kouko, and his heart was under her control?

Trying to think, Banri concluded a short while later that he simply didn't know.

Kouko had come back for him.

Despite it seeming unlikely that she was going to love anybody but Yanagisawa Mitsuo anytime soon, and Banri being only barely somebody that "could not be left behind", she had come back to get him.

Watching the miserable-seeming Banri while they were leaving, the other freshmen had no intention of criticizing him (since he had persuaded them to leave him there by himself), but finally she had raised her voice. She didn't doubt Mr. Two Dimension's friendship, but after all, as the driver he probably would not be able to return.

But, indeed Kouko, even if only as a friend Kaga Kouko, even if she couldn't remember his name, returned for the sake of Banri "He isn't Mitsuo", something he didn't even think she would do. He didn't think there were such people.

Since Kouko behaved that way, and with the "ten percent" just mentioned, it seemed that perhaps there just might be something inside her.

That something existed inside her he knew at least, just what use it would be, well it's all your fault, whatever, to Banri it didn't seem likely.

"...I wonder if *Yana*-ssan knows Kaga-san's in that kind of state."

"What kind of state?"

"No, something like... It's because it seemed you're a little different when *Yana*-ssan is around, versus when he is not."

A little to his dismay, he saw Kouko's eyes open wide. Or so he thought.

For Banri, the time Yanagisawa was with Kouko was when she gave him a surprise attack with a huge bouquet of roses. Beating the daylights out of Yanagisawa with roses in front of all the new students, throwing them at the guy and leaving. As if patting a pet, looking down from above, disregarding whatever complaint Yanagisawa might have had. Pursuing the escaped Yanagisawa, reproaching him for having escaped. If she somehow caught him, she would use up to live ammunition (it's a matter of money).

Saying "Whatever, it doesn't matter", while Banri seemed to be the only person waiting in Kouko's "ten percent." Saying, "I can't leave him behind in such a place", and returning, seemingly just for Banri. Even awkwardly trying to apologize, then even trying to horse around and laugh like an ordinary girl, maybe, just for Banri. ...Maybe.

Banri, because he saw that, today's Kouko, yesterday's Kouko--- the Kouko around Yanagisawa was a different person, he thought.

But Yanagisawa, if he had seen the same thing, he probably would have thought the "Now-Kouko" differently.

"If so, I think he'd be wrong."

She went quiet for a moment, as if thinking, then,

"In the time I was with Mitsuo, I was complete. You just might have that right."

Laughing a little, she looked at Banri, then averted her eyes. Raising her slim leg straight up, she looked at Banri's socks covering her toes. Seeing that sidelong look made her seem to him a girl he didn't know.

"Without Mitsuo, I am incomplete. Whether getting up in the morning, going to bed at night, eating my meals or going to school, dressing up nice, crying or laughing, it is all for Mitsuo. He is the whole purpose behind everything I do. If it weren't so, I wouldn't even try. Without him, life has no meaning. It was always that way for me. If he's not following behind me, there is nothing I can do. If Mitsuo's not there, I don't know what I should do. Even now, I want to get back safely, because Mitsuo is there. Am I thinking like a fool? It's OK, because I really am a fool."

But such love she had for herself, that continuing, Kouko looked up once more to Banri's eyes, straightened her back, and showed her perfect, beautiful smile. This once again, was the face of a girl he didn't know.

To such a person as this, well, whatever he said she wouldn't want to listen anyhow, so, covering up his feelings, Banri gave her a frank reply,

"...If that were the case, it would all be fine in spite of your having gotten *Yana*-ssan mad. But there what with the roses, as far as his life is concerned, the completed person is very messed up. Far from being nice to him, wasn't it an attack? Why did you willingly do something to get yourself disliked?"

He said that for now. As for her internal ten percent --- his purpose was for her to know that he existed.

It seemed she heard him perfectly, judging by the stiffly displeased look on her lips in the dark.

"He... that wasn't good for Mitsuo."

"How so? It seems to me the perfect Kaga-san isn't so good, normally."

"But! But, you're wrong! I have my reasons! I exploded after four months of frustration! It's not like I planned for such a thing to happen! It was my intention to ride up in the taxi with the roses, congratulate him with a smile and hand over the roses! Just leaving behind the smell of roses... surprising Mitsuo... and then around campus, we'd say 'those roses mark the spot we got together...', that was an even more perfect scenario!"

"Was that what you thought meeting up with him would be like?"

"He would have said, 'That was a knockout blow: You had the courage to have pursued me to the same university!' "

"...Seriously?"

"Seriously! Really, that's was how it was supposed to be! But... well, the result was this. ...Mitsuo, was always telling me about 'doing the escalator'. I found out that was all a lie around the end of the year. Since then I always pretended to be deceived, so that it looked to him that I was doing the escalator too, faking it to the point of taking the same entrance exams."

"A disguise..."

"Wig and glasses. Suspecting a second entrance exam, I called up the examiner. So it was that day after day he kept on lying, and I could see it the whole time. Perhaps today he would tell me the truth. Perhaps tomorrow. 'Surely the day after tomorrow...', I persisted, but all the way to the end, graduation already done, Mitsuo wouldn't tell me the truth. I overlooked the lies. Then, on the day of the entrance ceremony, idiotically walking with Tada-kun, looking as if he were having fun... 'What the heck!?' I couldn't stand it anymore."

How many seconds of silence passed? And then,

"Now, I am regretting it."

Kouko looked up into the night sky.

Starlight shining through a break in the trees fell on Kouko from above. She gave a deep sigh, together with a thin voiced "ah". Head hanging down, her hair again hung straight down.

"...Seems like it... From where I sit, it seems you are being disliked, right? Even at the entrance ceremony, it would have been better if you'd simply hugged him and given him a kiss. What you accomplished was different. ...Even so, to be ignored so completely and perfectly... was certainly not."

That's the way it was, really--- Banri looked back at the sad face whitely illuminated, quietly thinking.

Really, I think that's the way it is, Kaga-san. Better than hurting him like that with roses, nearly to the point of drawing blood, just showing that face--- that Kaga Kouko, even once, would be far better, he thought.

A million times, or ten million times, or even a trillion times better, he thought.

Banri had not known until now how somebody could be impatient with human clumsiness, even like this. Because of how the day was turning out, he knew the feeling for the first time.

"The only one who's supposed to do dumb things like that, in this world, ever, is me."

Perhaps too tired still to walk again, Kouko stiffly moved her legs while just barely cracking a smile.

"I don't think you're like that, though. You're just not the type of person to be able to do that

right."

"Yep, it's absolutely just me. ...I am the most to blame in this, I did something dumb. What about you, Tada-kun? What about you? Is there somebody you like? Do you have a girlfriend?"

She was planting landmines under the night sky.

It was a rest-break with no more meaning than that, so more easily than ever Banri was able to open his mouth and chat with her.

"Maybe, and maybe not. I don’t know for myself. Just that 'My memories were all blown away,' since that's speaking the truth."

Like a surprise attack, Kouko winked back at him.

"...What kind of speaking?"

"Speaking about loss of memory."

Banri pointed at his head with his finger. "Well...", while he began hesitantly to talk, that finger turning in circles.

"It was shortly after my high school graduation ceremony. Early in the morning, I was alone and it seems I fell from the bridge. Since then my memory has left me. Though I may feel like saying it, I can't just say '...So what?' It doesn't work to say that every time I talk. For the time being, could you simply understand? I can't be always saying things like 'I can't remember anything from childhood through high school', of course."

As he looked at Kouko, who had fallen completely silent, looking troubled, Banri thought "Well, she ought to be!" If somebody were to suddenly talk about losing their memory, you'd probably be confused too.

But normally, I would hope you would just be seeing the face of an ordinary nineteen year old boy.

"A marvelous thing, the word "remembering"--- an ordinary, normal thing in the Japanese language. Whatever year A.D. it be, whatever you call it, whatever you study, whatever you watch on television, whatever calendar a person or actor uses, it is understood. Even the teacher of moonlight, right? Even Ruu Ooshiba, right? I don't understand the problem with me. My particular memories don't exist. People I knew or were related to, who I liked, ...in short the things that gave me 'individuality'. It is certainly a strange tale. My family, my friends, and my self all stored in my memories, even after a year of rehabilitation, even after all I did, completely gone. What's more,"

Seeming unable to remember 'that' feeling, the self-conscious Banri picked his words carefully.

"Very slowly, my emotions returned. They seemed like something I missed... but if I chased after them, they fled away. For example, imagine a piece of paper with a letter written on it. Trying to read it, you would look at it, and automatically from your gaze a beam would burn up the sentence. It felt rather like that. The traces of memory were like a ghostly tail I could barely touch, and it seemed to be rapidly fading away. That was a rather scary feeling..."

After the accident always, if I didn't remember, if I didn't remember quickly, then it just faded away. Time passed, and I rapidly lost track of things. More than simply pointing out "You have certainly lost something", the feeling of losing something was always, always fresh.

"But as time passed, even those feelings disappeared, and I became resigned to it, saying 'What's the use?' But, it mattered nothing since I was unable to sense them anymore. Losing it was scary, though I couldn't really feel it since it was already 'gone'. Because of that, things got easier."

What was left to Banri now was just a memory of the fear of that time when everything was rapidly leaving him.

"Because of that, I had to study over again for the entrance exams, as if I'd had to start life over again."

"...Err..."

"Sorry, I was speaking nonsense."

"...Yes. No problem... It's just that,"

Kouko brought her hands to her chest. As she took a number of deep breaths, he saw that her hands moved together with her chest.

"...How you can say that's OK, I have no idea."

"But it is. Excuse me, really, but I'm not worried about it. Really now, since you're in good health. What's your blood type? What's your sign? You like soy sauce or paste? Memory loss? Mem riloss? That's about what I heard. If you have any questions, please let me know."

From Kouko's mumbling, it seemed she hadn't heard a thing he'd said, and didn't know what to say.

"...Err, well... weren't you just saying you wanted to get back...?"

"Yes, I must have been."

Since it was his long awaited chance to talk with her, he had wanted to be able to answer truthfully and honestly, Banri thought.

"Nonexistent things don't make sense to me. I'll say that first of all. As for myself, I have no choice but to speak from my own feelings. But, as for other people, I could understand them saying that they might want the original Tada Banri to return. In fact, it's about time he tried to return, I think. But in that regard, it gives me the feeling that adding memories to my current self is OK, even though it is replacing parts of my personality, so to speak, allowing the disappearance of my former self to be forgiven. From the start it looked impossible, and I've even been saying all along that there was nothing I could do, or even wanted to do."

"...Is that so?"

Her face serious as she listened to Banri's tale, Kouko lowered her eyes a little as if in thought.

"...That was a really strange story, wasn't it? What kind of guy was he, the vanished side of Tada Banri-kun? Perhaps he's watching over the current Tada-kun wherever he is... Kind of like a ghost in the background."

And, Kouko, seeming to notice something, suddenly turned around.

"What? What's going on? Is there a ghost behind Kaga-san?"

"...Something, just now, I saw a small flash of light... ah, ah, look!"

Kouko was pointing towards a thick grove of trees. She stared as the little light, certainly not a street light, swayed back and forth.

"You're right! Somebody's there! Let's go, let's call for help! Can you stand!?"

"Yep!"

Banri took Kouko by the hand, the two of them staggering while they frantically walked out on the muddy path. "Excuuse mee! Could you help uusss! We've had an accideennnt!", they raised their frantic voices.

On the other side of the trees, the shadowy figure held a nearly dead flashlight. Their voices still not noticed, anyway in a daze they continued advancing, having no choice. Sliding while supporting Kouko's hand, pushing through grass, clearing away branches, hurrying but not falling down.

A line of people, ...everyone with their bodies bent over a little, moving their hands and feet uncertainly. All of them. In the middle of the night on a mountain trail, while they shone the light on each other. What a strange atmosphere, he thought. It was about time.

"Ju, jujuju, just a second. Tada-kun, those are really strange people."

Kouko stopped walking. She looked at Banri.

"What I mean... aren't they those believers from earlier...!?"

If that were the case, then jumping would be a big mistake. A huge, fatal blunder. Trying to retreat, confused, they broke a branch, making a sound. Whereupon, no matter how much they kept from raising their voices,

"Is somebody there?"

A long straight beam of light turned towards them. With a surprised-sounding voice,

"...Banri!?"

They heard somebody's surprised shout. The light gave a big shake at the voice.

Exhausted, Kouko's strength gave out. Supporting her, pulling her along so they could escape, Banri eventually crumbled to his knees too. Standing up and running to escape hurriedly on foot, they vainly rejected the slimy damp earth. They were already at the limit of their strength. Even if everybody was a believer, there was nothing more they could do. However,

"It's me! Don't you understand!? Hey, it's me! Remember!"

Shouting while the person pointed the light at him, he suddenly raised both hands high, encompassing the whole place, shouting "Hey!" and striking a pose. That pose reminded him of something---

"...Eh!? Maybe, maybe, you..."

Even the disaster of the school entrance ceremony had laid land-mines for him!

"Barbara!?"

"It's Linda!"

Chapter 4

Tada Banri is turning into a tuna-fish.

In spite of being awake, he can't seem to get up, his body stretched out on the bed and his eyes open in slits, just like a cat's. He is just like a tuna-fish hauled up to Yaisu... for a half-hour already Banri has been like a tuna-fish.

In the entrance-way, corridor and the kitchen, despite it being early in the morning, the veil of darkness has been torn, as if forgetting the night. In the shadowy corner, sitting on a second-hand stool, I've been watching Banri, the tuna-fish.

Facing the two open windows to the northwest, today's weather looks good again, the morning sunlight shining in gently through the cotton curtains he had purchased at a home-center. But as bright as it is around the window, the light doesn't reach to the middle of the room.

By the time they were deciding on this room, they had stopped hesitating over other possibilities. If the place had been a Japanese-style room facing south, then by this hour even the room's nooks and corners would be brightly lit by the morning sunlight, and it would certainly feel nice. Of course that property was good, I am thinking even now. But the wardrobe was big. That room's closet is too small, and already clothes, pajamas, bags and such are already starting to be scattered here and there.

Wrapped up in an eggshell colored sheet, his face still a little puffy and disheveled, Banri as usual was only just opening his eyes. Banri's body wasn't moving, and the still unhealed scratches and sores over all his body were not to blame. Neither were the new complications with people, nor the hectic life of a student, nor the feelings of getting used to living alone.

Every now and then, Banri searches for me.

It's getting to feel as if by holding on to his dreams he was getting clues, as if he thinks that by not moving, he might catch his quarry unprepared, so with his eyes alone he is searching for me. He is understanding that it is futile, and he is planning to stop, but he searches anyway.

"How does he hope to find me?", as if he could hear me if he tried. But even if he could hear, "What in the world? Why are you searching?", he wouldn't understand. Finding and catching me, would that return me to inside of him? Or perhaps, would he erase me entirely? Even so, that guy would not even understand my so-called existence. Such a thing he just cannot do.

So then, Banri, realizing the impossibility of what he was doing, as usual became dejected. Taking a breath, he closed his eyes once more, as if he were awfully tired, bothered by nothing working, and before long crawled under the sheets once more. However many times he did it, even leaving his parents' home and living alone, Banri still didn't change. Still, here he was.

I knew what Banri was going to do next. After all, haven't I seen this show so many times before? Hiding under the sheets, Banri has after a while fallen asleep again. In the time I've existed, after all, how many times has he fallen into this trap? It's called falling back to sleep.

This sleep is strangely powerful, heavy and deep, hitting Banri all at once. Even having set his cell-phone alarm to wake him up, with a required exposition on criminal law that he hadn't even started on, Banri doesn't even twitch.

Getting down from the strangely comfortable stool, I approached the bed. Buried near the pillow was the cell-phone, once more making noise. This time it wasn't the alarm that went off. It was from Linda. Wake up, Banri.

If he were to out and say, "Hello, who is it?", Linda would sure be surprised. ...But no, she wouldn't be particularly surprised, would she? There wasn't anything mysterious about calling Tada Banri, or going out with Banri either, in a normal world was there?

Anyway Banri, wake up quickly. ...In other words, really get up. The noise from the alarm or from the cell-phone is making the lady next door mad, and she's hitting the wall. There it is again, the strangely hard sound is frightening.

Doesn't that hurt her fist?

* * *

"Mr. Two Dimensions! Hey thanks! Heeyy Thaaankkss!"

"Noo proobleeem! Catch yooouuu laaateeer!"

"Toomoorrooww! Aarrouunndd luunnchhtiimmee!"

"Soouunnddss fuun!"

"Oookaaay theenn!"

"Toomoorrooww theenn!"

Giving a big wave, as if somebody were leaving the dock on a ferry, Banri saw off Mr. Two Dimensions, who went ahead at a brisk pace. He could see his back as he was swallowed up in a group of students, like a young girl holding both hands before his chest,

"Mr. Two Dimensions, Satou Takaya-kun... good luck with your job at the tempura shop! No matter what, don’t get yourself burnt...!"

He earnestly wished still more. As it happened, Mr. Two Dimensions' high-school nickname was "Satou Taka". Anyway, according to the guy himself, rather than be called by that name, he preferred Mr. Two Dimensions "forevermore."

Yanagisawa, staring at Banri with an amazed look in his eyes,

"Causing problems even for Mr. Two Dimensions, really, what were you doing?"

He drank down the cloudy green tea he had put into a bottle of black oolong tea. "In other words," his voice continued awfully scratchy, now in scolding mode.

"When I first saw your text message, I thought that was absolutely the strangest thing ever. Really, were you truly in mortal danger? How could you not notice? To begin with, taking along new students who weren't even proper members of the club to a training camp in April, wasn't that a bit strange? And you followed along blindly even so?"

Not even talking back, Banri's shoulders slumped. His honor as the elder, completely fallen. In the past such a problem didn't exist, even in theory.

That nightmare of a Saturday, driving back to Tokyo with the freshmen, Mr. Two Dimensions was unable to contact Banri and Kouko, no matter how much time went by, and wondered if he ought to report it to the police. He finally was able to get connection to Banri's cell-phone, and when he'd managed to explain the situation, "Are you all right!? We're fine~, Kaga-san had left too, we were really scared~!", Mr. Two Dimensions was crying into the phone. "Sorry for leaving you behind", he said again.

Remembering it now, he was truly sorry. Having caused somebody to worry about him, having been apologized to, all of it was inexcusable.

"Enough, really... even I don't understand my foolishness... a feeling like 'help me'. Save me from myself!, so to speak."

"But though there's Banri, there's also Kouko. She is such an airhead!"

While Yanagisawa leisurely went descending the stairs, he gazed longingly at the bit of tea powder stuck to the bottom of the bottle and let out a sigh.

"Did she even understand what kind of dangerous situation she was going through? ...Anyway if she was safe, then I suppose it was OK."

Banri pushed the arch of his foot against a corner of the stairs in order to shamble after Yanagisawa. The hard corner stimulated his still-sluggish feet. Having done so felt good, somehow.

They were engulfed in the hustle and bustle of school building at lunchtime, with people heading to the cafeteria and others heading to meeting places, some coming, some returning, some meeting, some separating. The people coming and going to their destinations made a lot of noise. Owing to the classrooms being on an upper floor, Banri and Yanagisawa, like Mr. Two Dimensions, watched the people coming up from the lobby one floor below.

At a landing of the stairwell, while gleefully swinging around a corner by catching the handrail, Yanagisawa looked down at Banri's face.

"In spite of having sent a text-message, 'Don't go, it looks suspicious', there wasn't even a reply. What about that?"

"Omaken"

"So, if you hadn't accidentally run into those Omaken people, wouldn't you have been in real trouble?"

Nodding while saying "Yes, you're right", he slipped at the corner trying to do the same thing Yanagisawa had done. Yelping idiotically while dropping his briefcase, he banged his shin against the steps, a direct hit. He saw stars. A group of girls passing close by laughed a little.

"...Hey, what's he doing? Banri's really dumb, isn't he?"

Unable to even answer from the pain, Banri then and there crouched down on the stairs. It's not as if he'd been endowed with the physique, power and will-power of Musashibou Benkei. Even if Banri were your average person, or perhaps some low-life rascal, keeling over and dying from the impact would not have been funny.

"O...www...!"

"That must've hurt. That made quite a bang. Right on the shin, too. Aah, just because I couldn't get ahold of you, was I going to just casually text Kouko!?"

"...To Kaga-san? ...That... well certainly... 'Fuaaaaaa!'...?"

While rubbing his shin to dull the pain, Banri looked up at Yanagisawa as he gathered up Banri's stuff. Yanagisawa shook his good-looking face from side to side.

"No, the surprising thing is that there was no answer. Ever since Saturday I've been completely ignored, in the usual way. Apart from that night, she's not paid any attention to me at all. ...Did she get back safely?"

"For sure, brought back together in the car of an Omaken senpai, an older girl."

"You went together to her house? Her parents' home?"

"Well, maybe, what of it? She called, ‘It's over there, this is good enough, thanks for the help!' and got out at the intersection, though."

"Which intersection?"

"Which, I cannot say... or even if it's all right to say."

For now, he bent over and tried to see how things were going with his still hurting shin. When he rolled up the cuff of his bluejeans, his limited vision shook.

Behind Yanagisawa. Stunningly bright, rose-pink with a bold, dark red flower pattern. Silk fluttering lightly, one-piece dress wonderfully frilly. At this point, he had no idea how a person could be so skilled at dressing up stylishly in such gaudy clothing.

He made a small ‘x' sign with his finger to be quiet, warning him "It's Kaga-san, over there!" He sent Mitsuo a private signal, as he was half hidden from Kouko by a fire door.

Emphasizing more than usual her luxuriant hair, a snow white hair-band. Sandals and bag also snow white. Even at a distance clearly beautiful, lips painted deep red, today's Kouko again was perfectly lovely.

Yanagisawa turned his back, not noticing. Kouko, in effusively good humor and spirits, showed her sparkling smile and spun herself around so as to show the hem of her skirt especially for Banri. She looked for all the world like a matador. The other students passing behind her looked with skepticism, even hostile glares at the strangely behaving, gorgeous, perfect Kouko. Banri, however, understood the meaning of Kouko's mysterious behavior. The girl hadn't even replied to the text messages from her beloved Yanagisawa.

Shortly Kouko frowned, troubled by the situation with Yanagisawa, but trying to move on. That scenario would eventually have to result in "Kuoukuoo!" In short, moving on to the stage of "Look here, take me!" Yanagisawa was the bull. The matador, Kouko.

That Yanagisawa's gaze was suddenly directed intensely beyond Banri.

"Chinami!"

Reflexively, Banri also turned around and,

"Ah, it's *Yana*. What'cha doin'?"

A short girl, like a middle-schooler, was approaching them with a smile.

It was the first time he'd seen her.

Or rather, that voice. It was so cute, Banri found himself smiling automatically. Not in the sense of acting like a fool, of course.

"We had classes down below, and now that it's over we were coming back up. What's Chinami up to, by herself?"

"Yep. Being a good kid, this afternoon I've got nothing going on. I'll be alone at lunch too."

Completely the voice actor, doing roles like young girls chattering, she was what you could call

an anime voice person.

She didn't seem to be assembled quite right: looking too young to be a student, with a voice too sweet. It hardly suited her small form. In other words--- her voice wasn't the only cute thing.

For a first meeting with the girl, she was somehow excessively cute. The more you looked at her, the prettier she seemed. While Banri without thinking focused on what he was seeing, yet he wanted Mr. Two Dimensions to see, as he thought these dimensions took cuteness to a new level.

Her visibly long, soft hair was only loosely gathered, and in spite of not wearing makeup her skin seemed to glow. Her looks and small build made her seem like a child from some foreign country. Showing a boyish silhouette in worn demins, but matched with a handmade lace-collared blouse, she had some sort of rustic outfitter's day-pack on her back, the which made her delicate form stand out in the crowd.

Whether that was stylish or not as girls go, for the time being, if you looked at it through Banri's eyes as a boy, it was a bit clumsy, or rather, to put it bluntly, primitive, he was thinking, but strangely, it was good. Setting aside whether it suited his taste or not, if there were a hundred guys, ninety-five of them would be trying to get her attention, trying to touch or poke, trying to get a reaction. Wouldn't he be thinking of such things? Of course Banri was amongst the ninety-five.

"Come to think of it, you two haven't ever talked before, right? Banri, this is Chinami. Chinami, this guy is Banri."

"Don't call me that!", unexpectedly speaking in unison, Banri and that kid, exchanging glances with Chinami. With a soft voice Chinami laughed. She smiled with her eyes too, and they turned into lines. She seemed to be smiling innocently, with nothing hidden on the other side of it.

Not saying even a single word, Banri looked back at her smiling face earnestly. And then Yanagisawa was looking at Chinami too. Intent on not missing even an instant, his eyes were chasing after her, not even blinking, watching Chinami's smiling face, like a fairy spontaneously coming out of the deep, thick forest. Even Banri could see what was going on.

This feeling. This *Yana* fellow. It seemed like---

"No way! We said it in harmony, didn’t we? Pleased to meet you. I'm Oka Chinami. *Yana* and I met at a film research club recruiting party."

---She was just right for him.

"Err, nice to meet you. I'm Tada Banri. *Yana*-ssan almost certainly has some connection with my previous life. Or rather, Oka,"

"Call me Chinami. Being called 'Oka' makes me sound like I'm an old maid."

"Ah. Then hey Chinami, China... excuse me, but this is a little awkward. I'll call you Chinami then. Chinami, ...excuse me, even this is hard to stop. Eh, Oka..."

Chinami looked at Banri's face, apparently with great curiosity as he spoke stupidly. Her dark eyes were a little bleary from being a natural airhead. It gave the impression of little letters spinning around in the middle of the pupils in her eyes. Inside such as little Chinami, around five hundred little heart marks wanted to call out. No no no, come back to earth.

"With Oka, that makes the third person with a two-syllable last name. There's Tada, Oka, and one more person, ...Kaga..."

With that tricky way of mentioning Kouko's name, Banri was casually trying to get a reaction from Yanagisawa. But the expression on his face didn't change. Didn't change, or perhaps because he was too enchanted, staring fixedly at the adorable Chinami, that other things, for example Banri's uninteresting and plain face, weren't even noticed. It appeared that he didn't even hear the name of his inconvenient childhood friend.

Chinami's eyes twinkled from Banri's dumb joke while she nodded at him.

"Wow, is that so? There's Hara, the girl in Film Research too! Counting Mita, the guy from phys-ed, just how many two-syllables are there here? This time, why don't we gather together a few two-syllable people and have a small drinking party? With this unexpected connection, we might have gotten something fun! Then I'll call for *Yana* too. Hey look, Ya-na, you're two syllables!"

She bumped Yanagisawa's elbow with her own, messing around.

Yanagisawa, looking even happier from that,

"Huh? But I'm five syllables, my real name has five syllables! We're in different classes!"

He bumped her back, his elbow to hers. His knock was stronger.

"Eh, finally, in spite of your saying you would call me, ihyahya! Hold on, hyaa!"

Chinami's last "Hyahahahaha!" went flying away as high pitched laughter. To blame was Yanagisawa, who was attacking her, tickling her sides. While she was laughing loudly "I'm ticklish! Stop it!" and trying to escape him, Yanagisawa was going after Chinami even harder, torturing her.

Kouko didn't even understand what she was seeing.

Or rather, she did. ...She was there, close by.

Remembering the situation, Banri's breathing caught. With what kind of face Kouko was looking at Mitsuo in his shamelessness, he was afraid to check. Was she about to blow up, or was she in

shock?

Unthinkingly failing to read the mood in their behavior, she went to separate the happy couple against their will. Forcing her arm between the two with all her strength, she separated them. Quite angry that he was being touched by Miss Chinami, she grabbed Yanagisawa roughly by the side.

"Ya, na, s, sa, n, it's true that your real name has five syllables! Chinami-chan, let's call him that! In a party for two-syllables he's the wrong kind of guy! He's quite the sexual harasser! Please be careful with the brute! Hey!"

"Haha, that's true! *Yana*-ssan is five syllables! Hey, stop that!"

"That's not my real name! Or rather, hey, ow, hold on, ouch, really, Banri, what are you doing!?"

"Is this what it feels like to have your chest ripped off!?", with the seriously unpleasant feeling of having his body torn apart at the shoulder, right then,

"...U!?"

Banri saw beige-pink claws, gripping like eagle's talons. There was no sound of crunching from Yanagisawa's bones, but there should have been from the force by which he was turned around.

"Mitsuo, what are you doing?"

Smiling sweetly--- a beauty, no longer a deadly weapon.

Standing firm in her loveliness, Kouko was smiling like a demon.

Her long eyelashes swayed as she slowly winked. Peeking through her deep red lips could be seen pure white teeth, tinged with blue. Striking a balance as if calculated, her dark brown, shining hair fell over her right shoulder.

"...Have I any relation to you? What are you doing?"

Yanagisawa coldly brushed away Kouko's hand, which was grabbing his shoulder.

Banri was strangely nervous, having watched over the situation of Kouko and Yanagisawa for a while now. Standing so close their feet overlapped, Kouko looked up at Yanagisawa, still smiling elegantly. Yanagisawa's good humor took a nose-dive at once, as he looked down at Kouko scowling.

Perhaps, Kouko should not have made her appearance. It would been better if she had simply played at, "Look what I caught!" So Banri thought. Nonetheless,

"Is there something going on here? What do you have to say for yourself?"

She really ought not to speak that way, like warning a child, as if looking down upon him, her nose in the air. She shouldn't be showing that perfect smile, as if she were enjoying herself, tormenting him. Stop it, Kaga-san... though he was thinking so, the message wasn't getting through to Kouko.

Kouko, still showing a shocked expression, gave one small shake of her head, causing the hair prettily wound about her slender neck to come undone and fall downwards. Folding her arms elegantly, she slowly raised her chin higher. She posed in a way that shifted her weight to one leg. Her frilly skirt fully fluffed out, emphasizing her slender waist, her silhouette was completely that of a queen bee.

"I don't want other women chatting with my lover."

"I am not your lover!"

"'Just chatting, but cheating', how many times have I said that?"

"'I am not your lover!', how many times have I said that?"

"I would like you to stop doing things I hate."

"How you fail to understand what I'm saying."

"Mitsuo says things like that because he doesn't listen. 'I would like you to stop doing things I hate,' I said. It'd be good if he'd obey, too. Because with only that much, everything can be made perfect."

Chinami was still stiff, as if surprised, just watching the strained argument between Kouko and Yanagisawa. Then she quietly turned one eye towards Banri. She whispered to Banri, "What's happening?", but her voice was noticed,

"What in the world?"

The haughty eyes of the queen bee looked impatiently at Chinami.

"What was that?"

"...Eh? That...m, me...?"

"Where did that voice come from?"

"Fr, from my mouth..."

"Mouth! From your mouth! That voice! What in the world!", Kouko as if amazed opened her

eyes wide, looking up once to the heavens. And then turning about with her perfect smile,

"Though it doesn’t matter that this mystery person showed up, to take a pass at Mitsuo for the moment. I am not begging, but commanding. Mitsuo isn’t just a lover. We’ll be planning our marriage soon. Understand? Marriage it is, marriage. Ma-rra-i-ge. It is destined. From the start you and I have been set apart from the world. Understood? Do you not understand? Understand! Now! At once! Right here!"

Pointing her finger at her, she approached Chinami.

"Eeh...?", Chinami, truly bewildered, blinked, unable to say anything.

Face to face, the difference in their heights was less than four inches. Richly colored brand-name clothing and sparkling jewelry on her, Kouko with one hand on her hip, her chin raised. And then looking down on the petite Chinami,

"---Hmph. Oka Chinami, eh?"

She looked at her with both eyes, as if examining something smelly a cat left at the side of the road. Unexpectedly, her high-heeled sandals were stepping on the toes of Chinami's boots. Banri too reflexively gulped, seeing she was willing to fight dirty. Certainly the type to put a thumbtack into a rival's toe-shoes. The type to have a pin on their fingertip when giving a handshake.

"I remember that name, for sure. Though I don't know what I've Chinami'd, well, do you like to Chinami? You live on your own? By all means, do as you please."

"...Huh...? Rather, you see, unfortunately my feet..."

"However, somewhere else in world from where we're at. Don't come near us. Don't bother us. Don't come near Mitsuo. Mitsuo is mine. Is that warning enough? Understand that there will be no warning next time."

"Kouko, stop it."

His handsome face freezing like a Noh mask, Yanagisawa stood in front of Kouko, giving Chinami his back as if to shield her.

Kouko, unconcerned, simply brushed Yanagisawa aside, putting herself even closer to Chinami. Bending over Chinami's forehead, her lips so close she could have kissed her, Kouko's fingertip pointed up at Chinami's chin like a gun.

"It's because you attacked. People like you are eliminated in a moment. Because that's the world. ...I will do anything. If you don't like that, then go to the ladies room and shiver, but why don't you leave? Why don't you just go hibernate for fifty years, or better yet a hundred twenty years."

A sweet voice coming from an elegant smile, she was a complete villian.

"Hey, didn't you realize? Isn't it really bad manners to reach out and touch other people?"

"Kouko, shut up."

"Hey, aren't you ashamed?"

"Shut up! Behave yourself!"

Grabbing the chain of Kouko's purse, Yanagisawa pulled on it. Losing her balance on her high-heels, Kouko took a quick step, staggering. Looking up at Yanagisawa's expressionless face, it seemed like for the first time she realized. She was dumbfounded for a moment, but immediately tried to regain her queen-bee expression,

"Go somewhere else."

"...So it is, Mitsuo. Send me a text-message, thanks. What we talked about, OK?"

"That's enough, I'm leaving. Chinami, let's go eat lunch. Banri!"

Called out to, Banri gulped, strangely awkward.

"Well, that, err, I... we have an appointment with that Omaken senpai. ...Kaga-san and I together."

Yanagisawa never even looked towards Kouko. Still as expressionless as ever, he looked at Banri's face for three seconds.

"OK. Then I'll text you when we get back."

He turned his back to them.

"Ah, *Yana*-ssan!"

Still uncomfortably holding his tongue, he left, walking beside Chinami. He called after that back.

"You have to put water in before you can drink it! And then the tea powder!"

"Calm down!", he thought, "Calm things down a bit!" It had no effect at all. Yanagisawa raised one hand as if tired, turning back to only Banri, answering "later". Parting the stream of students, their backs shortly disappeared.

Banri let out a long breath. While combing up his bangs, he returned to Kouko's side,

"Kaga-san, hold on, say what you like..."

He paused to catch his breath again.

"...However you want to say it, what was all that...!?"

The detested side of Kaga Kouko, the villian, was standing behind him.

She was so scared that sweat was running on her forehead, on her neck, in fact, from all over her body. I could tell since, right now, wham! I was able to see that she was proudly folding her arms, perhaps by chance that pose,

"...By chance are you hiding the sweat of your armpits...?"

Kouko didn't answer. As if she hadn't heard anything, she was looking away, her face beautifully composed.

Nonetheless, her whole body strangely bathed in sweat, she stayed put, both hands holding her armpits. Even her face was settling down to a blank expression, deathly pale. Normally she would be brighter, her expression clearing.

"For once, are you feeling guilty...?"

Still unable to open her mouth, she suddenly nodded at Banri's word.

"I mean really, something's already dripping... it looks pretty bad... are you OK?"

Once more, a nod. And then a few words, "Since there is no bread, I want to eat cake," though with a note of sarcasm,

"Perhaps I should go dry myself in the bathroom."

Simply that.

Sure, why not..., Banri nodded. While seeing off Kouko to the girl's bathroom, her arms still folded in a strangely stiff pose, he checked the time on his cell-phone.

"Well..., if you could hurry up... it will shortly be time for our meeting with Linda after all."

Shaking her head quickly as if she were a broken puppet, Kouko disappeared beyond the bathroom door.

That was the last he saw of her figure.

---But that was not at all what he meant. Kouko appeared again after several minutes. She had at last put on the cardigan, and her hair and makeup was perfect. "Sorry I took so long, Tada-kun", even showing a smile, it seemed she had managed to restore her normal, entirely perfect outward appearance. But,

"...Are,"

"Don't go asking 'Are you OK?', because I'm fine."

"...Bu,"

"Don't go saying 'But you see,' because I'm fine."

"...Ka,"

"Don't go saying 'Kaga-san, what are you doing?' Don't go telling me 'Are you an idiot?' Because I understand. I know. I'm foolish. Yes, a big disaster. Yes, yes, yes, I'm guilty. I was hated for that again today. On the way to the disaster I already knew it, but I could not stop, I could not admit defeat, knowing how many years I've been doing the same thing over and over again, something I cannot give up! So it is, because I'm a fool! But having been convicted, there's nothing I can do about it! And I can't turn back the hands of time! ...But sorry about that, let's hurry up. Let's not keep the Omaken senpai waiting."

Not letting Banri get a word in edgewise, with a toss of her hair Kouko walked out.

Since were it possible to say anything like "You're looking good now", then she would probably have to reply "Do you really mean it?"

The sound of her high-heels echoing wasn't as confident as usual. Neither her energy, nor her spirit, not her vitality, nor hardly anything else was sufficient.

* * *

Regarding the rescue of Banri and Kouko after they got into their mess in the mountains, the start of term training camp for the "Japanese Festival Cultural Research Society" was going on in the seminar house. ...Their nickname, Omaken. The nickname came from 'Festival Research Society'. She said, "There was talk going around the student affairs office right away, you see. 'A strange bogus club was trying to infiltrate the school, scattering pamphlets around, inviting people to join.' "

She was Hayashida-senpai.

Hayashida Nana, her nickname Linda. A natural born Japanese. This was the person that first noticed Banri when he called for help.

"You did such a thing for our sakes?"

While walking close behind, in spite of Kouko speaking, Linda was looking over her shoulder, and could be seen smiling and shaking her head. Seeing her that way, Banri was once again surprised at how unexpectedly normal a person she seemed to be. ...Wasn't saying such things rude? But, this Linda before him chatting and the Linda which on the day of the entrance ceremony materialized before him from the Edo era and threw him a kiss, he had a feeling they were the same person.

Just a little shorter than Kouko, with a softer voice, walking briskly with both hands stuffed into her pockets, her attitude was recklessly peaceful, filled with quiet force.

"It wasn't just for you two! It's self-defense, sort of."

There was that face. That of a saint.

Because of with her gentle, beatific face, even her long stride, even her casual way of talking, she didn't seem boyish in any way.

"'Omaken', to put it simply, do research into the old and admirable Japanese custom of the Cultural Festival, taking part in those times, leaving a legacy for future generations... though we're doing the typical activities, though you could say our presence is not required."

With every word she said, Linda's colorless lips seemed to wrinkle, pursing tightly.

"Of course, isn't it a little suspicious? I cannot say for sure that festivals and religious beliefs are not completely unrelated. Not that long ago, there was a big religious sort of event around here, and I've heard that for a long time afterwards they kept our club under a close eye, suspicious of us. Given that background, we've tried to present ourselves as a perfectly normal, respectable club whenever we have the chance. We tell everybody, 'We aren't strange, really, and being lumped together with such strangeness is troublesome for us. We would like to cooperate with you fully to expel these suspicious elements.'"

"I see..."

Nodding while walking alongside Kouko, Banri casually gave the elbow of her cardigan a tug. The two of them stepped quietly over some Monday Special, thrown out earlier in front of a tavern, not looking down at it.

In this part of town, a lot of old office buildings one after another, more than students one could see the forms of salarymen out for lunch. Their company IDs hung from their necks but stuck in their shirt pockets, the white-shirted forms moved along in groups, all the tired faced adults, impossible to tell apart one from another, materialized from here and there. Linda, like a worldly cat, easily weaved her way through the gaps in the men. They stuck with her after that, but Banri and Kouko were still a little slow.

"Catching up with you two, well, was really dangerous. Even the Student Affairs Office was

saying they understood. It was just now becoming a problem at other colleges. That 'religion', so to speak, might even have been a pyramid scheme, from the awful amount of accessories, amulets and such that were being purchased. It was really good you could escape, oh, you can buy lunch here."

Clad in pretty fluorescent colored Nikes, her feet stopped. It seemed from a glance as if Linda had flinched a little, passing beneath an old sign, carefully lettered. "Auntie!", she called, and a woman wearing an apron appeared from the back at once.

"Good to see you again. We're sold out of today's special, Karaage, croquettes, hamburger and even seaweed bentou. Would you like Tonkatsu or Menchi?"

"Today's special's out!? Karaage and hamburgers too!? What's this place coming to...!"

"If only you'd come 15 minutes earlier..."

"Eh, then we'll settle for menchi."

"It's not polite to call it menchi."

"I'll take menchi gladly! What would you two like?"

Same for me, answered Banri's voice, and Kouko too nodded her agreement. "Three menchi, if you will", said Linda, giving the order. "Three menchi, as you wish", said the lady, immediately taking the order into the back. From somewhere back inside the tavern, a voice sang back "As you wish!" "Oh, possibly...", said Banri slowly bending way back, looking up at the letters on the sign. But, his back was struck by something,

"Don't worry about it, it doesn't matter since it's a chain shop. It was just for the atmosphere."

He was convinced that Linda, with her face of a saint, could see through anything and everything. Hmph, a small laugh in a strange voice could be heard from Kouko. Somehow or other, from the state she was in, sweating all over and ashen faced, she seemed to have recovered.

His mind relieved, Banri with undisguised curiosity,

"By the way, have you ever had menchi, Kaga-san?"

He asked Kouko and watched.

"Have I? Why?"

"Balls of ground meat, dipped in batter and deep-fried in oil. Casual food for the masses, eh?"

"Yeah, I already knew that! There're things to eat, you know."

"There are. ...Is that so?"

Looking at Kouko's face blandly answering, without thinking Banri smiled. Menchi for Kaga Kouko. Such things didn't seem to go in combination. Kouko went with wine, foie gras and caviar. In his mind's eye, she polished an expensive diamond on her finger while drinking expensive imported wine and holding a Persian cat. Wearing some kind of gorgeous gown, naturally, the term "rocking chair" came to mind at once.

Listening to their picking and choosing, Linda too looked back, bouncing her wallet in her hand while watching Kouko and grinning.

"Terrible. It doesn't suit you at all."

Perhaps she was thinking along the same lines as Banri. He said "of course it does", miming holding a brandy glass and rocking his body back forth. When the proper term came to mind, he said "A rocking chair."

"Is that so? But I like menchi. My favorite food is salted fish and smoked radish pickles... With regards to Donbee, I'm in the deep blue Kitsune Udon club... Err, don't worry, I'm paying."

"That's fine, it's my treat. Though just for today, OK? With how you guys have been looking worn out lately, I'm not worried about collecting $2.50 in lunch money from you."

"Cheap!", Banri exclaimed in surprise. It really looked like there was deflation all around. From now on they needed to check this store, and there was no way he was going to reveal it, even for a certain temporarily down-on-his-luck princeling.

"That, really, must be too miserable. As for me, in dreams I've seen it all. In the dead of night, wearing only house slippers. Four syllables passing through my mind like an escaped prisoner."

"It's not four syllables!"

Like the upperclassman she was, Linda quietly ignored the retort. She got some small change from her wallet and without a word pushed it roughly into Kouko's hand, accepting the three boxed lunches stuffed in a single bag.

"You're welcome! Come again!"

Receiving $10 in change from the lady, she walked ahead of Banri and Kouko once more. Almost an attack, Banri's hand was reaching out, taking the unexpectedly heavy bag.

That night, when Banri and Kouko lost their way, it seems that they had been walking towards the real college seminar house without knowing it. Their shouts in the woods were heard by Linda, and they were rescued by everybody in her training camp. They explained their situation and the next morning, they were sent back home by car.

They owed her a debt of gratitude that could not be forgotten.

Consequently, both Banri and Kouko were already able to commit themselves to her permanently.

They didn't know for sure just what they were doing for Omaken, but whatever they were going to be doing, the feeling didn't change. In this way the decision was made.

Apparently the older Omaken had struggled with a shortage of help in the past. Overjoyed, they had invited the two of them over. So today, as it turned out, just like that, that they were going to show up for the noon meeting.

In the whole little campus town, there really wasn't anything really cool for a clubroom, so under normal circumstances, they gathered around the lecture building first floor lobby table, or got together at a local coffee shop, and then once in a while, like today, they might rent the district meeting hall.

There were so many things they might do: dress up in kimonos and rescue people from samba dancers, opening a rally, sliding down a mountain path riding atop a log, aim at targets while mounted on horses, wolfing down rice cakes, letting babies cry in a sumo arena, stuffing themselves with mountains of food--- Japanese festivals were really so many things--- And Banri was planning to do them. Kouko must have been thinking the same thing too.

"Take a look, that yellow building over there. We've been using it for generations. We practice over there, in our first floor club-room."

Linda looked back over her shoulder, she pointed at a rather old three story building. Then,

"Remember it well. Don't forget, first-years."

She smiled at Banri and Kouko's faces.

The line of her jaw was divided into many pieces by her swaying hair, the light of the sun showing through brightly. As it was, as if about to go running she wore a nylon hoodie with a logo on it. Pants reaching only just past the knees. Calves. Slim ankles. Brightly colored, not quite new NIKEs. Her face looked out over the slightly bossy upperclassmen.

She tried to hold herself aloof from the world, light and breezy, but not too invisible. The neighborhood with Linda's form in it grew strangely comfortable for Banri. How in the world did he wind up spending the rest of the day with her? He had a hunch it was going to be fun. Banri's spirits rose at once, but,

"…?"

Suddenly he felt he was suffocating. His feet stopped.

To untangle his memory. "Don't forget!"

"Don't forget, Banri---" It seemed as if Linda's voice were catching in her throat. Making noises in the hot lining of her throat, as if she wanted to cry for him.

...Wanted to, but no, why would she call out to Banri?

"Aren't you coming, Tada Banri! What're you doing?"

Called out to by his exact full name, Banri, confused, shook his head. He didn't understand at all. He didn't have time to stand there and brood. Chasing after Linda and Kouko, he went into the refreshingly cool entrance. Advancing down the dim corridor, they opened a door.

Before his nose, the smells of tatami mats and bentou lunches combined. Like something they'd come to dearly miss, they were everyday smells.

"In here we take off our shoes, OK? You brought first-years!"

Their voices in chorus, "Whoa!", a bunch of people sitting around on the floor looked back over their shoulders. There might have been all of ten people, some of whom they recognized from their disaster. "We're terribly grateful for your help at that time…", they said, once more bowing their heads deeply as they said "It's a newcomer!", "The first newbies of the year!", "She's a pretty one!" and so on, brandishing their chopsticks at them and all of them applauding together in greeting. The atmosphere overpowering him, "Thank you…", said Banri feeling small and taking off his shoes.

Of course, slippers weren't really needed in this room, with its tatami floor. From wearing sandals that screamed "It's springtime!", Kouko was strangely uneasy going barefoot, suddenly becoming shorter, even more than Banri getting smaller and smaller, as she came inside.

Linda waved Banri and Kouko towards the middle of the room,

"That side's the third years, OK? Hi!"

The people in the area she pointed to gathered their voices.

"Hi!"

This time she pointed to an area a little apart,

"And on that side, the second years. Howdy!"

"Howdy!"

Seated in a circle, the people brandished their chopsticks.

"The fourth-years couldn't show, and you first-years are our first newcomers. Thanks!"

Involuntarily echoing, "Thanks!", raising one hand in the same pose Banri was giving them, Kouko simply blinked over and over again. It didn't quite fit her image as a lady.

"Well, first of all why don't we have lunch? Sit over there, here's a cushion."

In an impolite manner, but skillfully, Linda slid the cushions over the tatami, from their line against the wall over to Banri and Kouko with her feet. For her own part lowering herself to sit Indian style, she handed them their bentou lunches.

With Linda sitting on her cushion as if to separate Banri and Kouko, they accepted their lunches. Kouko knelt in a very lady-like manner, spread a large handkerchief over her lap and set her bentou neatly upon it. Banri too, unaccustomed to kneeling, opened up his bentou. Reflexively, a quiet "Whoa..." escaped him. He didn't think it was from deflated prices, but there was a large portion of rice and plenty of side dishes. This, simply put, was happiness.

"This lunch really perks me up... it's good! Will you be able to eat all of yours, Kaga-san?"

"Yes, probably. Linda, thank you for the food."

"You bet. Eat, eat. Since it's OK while we're eating, look over there, won't you? Since you're going to be involved with that group this year."

Linda pointed with her chopsticks at a laptop computer that had been left open on a table set near the window. The wide screen was filled by a video being played back,

"...Ah!?"

Without thinking, Banri slapped his legs. Of course, his chopsticks got stuck in his jeans.

"That outfit, wasn't it an Edo Period cosplay!?"

"Eh...", some of the upperclassmen turned their heads sadly at Banri's voice.

"Very much so! I can't invite anybody into the club without doing something cosplay!"

"I mean, isn't that so? Haven't I ever explained it?", Linda set down her chopsticks for a moment. Raising her face once more, she turned around to face Banri and Kouko.

"Well, you can't really call it cosplay, though. That time I had barely started practicing, really, since at that point I was only dressed the part. We Omaken do something different every year. In fact, last year we were in Yosakoi Soran. We were thrown in as a backup group for a team from an alliance of colleges, though. And now this year we are that!"

On the notebook monitor, the characteristic light step, the waving of hands. Lines of women

together wearing bamboo hats and formations of men with twisted hand-towels wrapping their heads. Light out, well into the evening. Crowds along the way, dripping sweat. Japanese summer. Summer festivals.

"Since the Omaken was organized, well, for the second time in four years! What was it now? Yeah, Awa Odori! That's it!"

Excitedly shouting "No way!", they applauded.

"That's just it--- we will be in the Dance of Fools. You will become fools and dance like crazy, newcomers."

From the beginning Banri had been a fool anyhow, but would Kouko be all right with that?

* * *

Staggering, her feet tangled up,

"I, can't... no, self-confidence..."

Kouko muttered in a low, low voice.

While they were walking together, side by side, Banri couldn't find the words to comfort her.

The Omaken senpai were still in the rehearsal room, practicing. Entering the third-floor lecture hall and giving their excuses, Banri and Kouko in spite of being underlings had managed to escape.

"Is there anything to drink? Even water to buy?"

While nodding, Kouko caught a curl that had somehow escaped and went to put it back with her fingertip. It slipped from her fingers and fell back down, all the way to the tip of her nose.

The upperclassmen from other universities that were at the training camp that rescued Banri and Kouko a few days before--- every year, they recruited teams from all over the region to participate in Awa Odori, and gave them personal coaching. And now, Linda was taking the two newcomers who hadn't been to the training camp under her wing, this year's Awa Odori practice having already started,

"My inadequacy... what should I do about it? My sense of rhythm? My reflexes? Or is it more in my head?"

"Sort of. We're still just starting, I've not done it before either."

"I got the feeling you can do it. At least, you have the makings more than I."

"My 'makings' are greatly exaggerated. From the very beginning I haven't had such."

"...But if you don't have it, then where am I...?"

Banri handed over a bottled water he had bought from a vending machine to Kouko, who stood there sighing miserably. Saying "Thanks...", she opened the top to take a drink,

And started coughing.

Had something gone down her windpipe? Kouko was choking and coughing violently. Dropping by the wayside, the lid went rolling towards a storm drain. Kouko followed it with her eyes, moaning "Aaa..." in an extremely miserable voice. "That" Kaga Kouko, up til then had been getting weaker and weaker. If Oka-chan had been there right then, she might have been able to get back at the bully queen--- but unable to say anything because of the mood, Banri quietly watched Kouko as she was.

Not that it was all that hard a thing to do.

In any case, it was only the first practice session. No, calling it a rehearsal was perhaps a bit much. It was just an introduction, no more.

Without even music, their feet still barefoot, just beating time "1, 2, 1, 2". With no distinction between the men's dance and the women's yet, they just tried beating time on their knees. Unable to speak with Linda, that was all they did.

On the tatami mats, all the Omaken stood evenly spaced, facing a mirror that had been installed on one wall. Then, with their feet spread to about shoulder width, both their hands open and lifted overhead, standing lightly on tiptoes. Calling out, "Here we go!", very casually, bent at the knees, simply rising and falling to the rhythm. "Loosening up, floating, it's the secret to dance", Linda said over and over again.

To this point Banri was having no problem. Some of the upperclassmen could already step out with alternate feet, fluttering their hands about, already doing it in that unique Awa Odori style.

Though what they would do had been decided, his mind spun around, "Awa Odori… is that so? Awa Odori, eh?" He felt awkward, but as he watched the older students lined up, in their T-shirted forms, with their light-footed changing steps, it dawned on him that they seemed a bit cool. Wearing twisted towels for sweatbands, showing stylishly, their heels visible sticking out of rolled down socks, wearing them as if only their toes were stuck in there... even all that was cool. Immediately imitating them, Banri checked that his socks were rolled down too.

However, there was Kouko.

Together 1, 2, 1, 2, for the time being they moved their necks back and forth. Over and over again.

But, they were slipping. Falling into the same rhythm as in the mirror, his head moving with the others lined up reflecting back. By itself, Kouko's head, unsteadily, wobbly, wasn't moving along with the rest.

Did she realize she was the only one out of synch? She was frantically trying to keep up with the rest, yet seemed not the least bit discouraged. From the very start her feet spread, twisting around, pigeon-toed as if she were feeling shy, her shyness held in check desperately, as if clinging to a boulder, her arms gradually descending weakly, towards the front as she had been learning to do. Her face was becoming steadily more rigid from the strain; she was becoming like Kishibojin, about to die.

"Kou-ko, Kou-ko, Kaga Kou-ko! Relax a bit! Take it easy! Laugh! Smile!", Linda over and over again called out to her. Each time, she tried to laugh a little, but Kouko's overly serious dance had no trace of flexibility at all. You got the feeling she was to crack at any moment. Her ever-perfect smile was a hundred million light-years away.

He understood, though he had forgotten the faces, as it was walking forwards and saying to Linda, "...C-3PO?" ---A strange thing, that he could remember something like that perfectly. Without even thinking he had put it into words. Some of the upperclassmen snorted when they heard it.

Kouko stopped practicing at once, her face going red.

"...Omaken, I'm beat, could we stop...?"

Banri was partially to blame in this, too.

Still holding the seemingly useless water bottle with the missing cap, Kouko slumped her shoulders and weakly muttered.

"I mean... sorry, Tada-kun, I, I forgot to give you money for the water..."

"It's OK, it's OK, as far as I'm concerned, it's no big deal. We've only just started. Besides, don't we owe Omaken? Have you forgotten already?"

"I haven't forgotten our debt, of course not. But... I've been thinking that perhaps we're going about paying them back the wrong way. Somebody like me, I'm just a burden. Maybe there's a better way than by joining a club. ...For example, a contribution. ...Or something like that."

"Aren't there other ways of paying them back that are better than money? Besides, if you were to quit, wouldn't that leave me by myself? Let's try to work together a bit more!"

"...Any more, embarrassing, carrying on..."

Looking a bit resentful, Kouko stared at Banri's face.

"That bit about C-3PO was bad of me! Sorry, really. I didn't intend to embarrass you, nor did I plan to tease you, it just came out..."

"...That's OK. Besides, you've not been trying to do such things to me, from the very start."

They started walking once more. Kouko let out a big sigh and spoke to herself.

"So it is... the very idea of coming here to college was a mistake. I've been messing up from the very start. Though I'm late, after all this time... what am I going to do..."

"You've got to where you're saying such things. Didn't you want to come to college with *Yana*-ssan? For now, that being the case, isn't it all right to say you accomplished that?"

"...But he's been avoiding me like the plague..."

"So lately it's been getting to be a game of playing hard to catch. That being the case, why not just let him be and let's go do Awa Odori, you and I together!"

"...But..."

"And then, on with the plan! We'll kick back and laugh for all to see! In black leather, having whips and whatnot for S&M bondage. Because that becomes Kaga-san."

"...I don't have such things..."

"Then buy them! It absolutely suits you!"

Chatting while they returned to the university building, Banri muttered "over there...", and stopped in his tracks. It was too late to change direction. Kouko saw the same thing Banri did.

At a table in the corner of the lobby, deep in conversation about something fun were the forms of Yanagisawa and Chinami. Since summer vacation they'd always seemed to be together, sitting facing each other, looking into each other's eyes, laughing like idiots, about ready to tip over the bench. It looked like the two of them didn't even realize Banri and Kouko were there.

Feeling as if he were breaking out in a cold sweat, Banri tried to quietly sneak a glance in Kouko's direction. He was afraid that she would charge at them again, just like before, with them as sitting ducks. But, this time, like you might expect,

"...It seems I cannot try today either. It'd be better if I just go home."

"Kaga-san"

"Today's been the worst."

Turning back at once, Kouko, her pretty skirt waving turned and went back down the street they'd just come down. Banri reflexively tried to follow after her,

"Kaga-san..."

"I'm OK!"

As if getting the better of herself, Kouko's voice hardened.

"...Since I'll be returning by taxi, here's fine. See you later, Tada-kun. Thanks for the water. ...Try to think about doing Awa Odori by yourself."

She trotted off, as if escaping from the lobby she left. Left behind alone, Banri must have lost his bearings for a moment.

In the end he returned to the lobby, to the table where Yanagisawa and Chinami were deep in conversation, then attempted to interrupt them by getting up on the table.

"Oh, Banri. What's with that entrance? I'd just now finished a text, I mean, what are you doing?"

"Interrupting your conversation."

Even though Yanagisawa seemed to be laughing merrily, he told him to shut up, and Chinami, looking as cute as ever, quickly rescued a water bottle so the bothersome Banri wouldn't knock it over.

"Hey, Chinami and I, we've officially joined Film Research. Won't you come in too? So let's make a movie, a movie! We might even be able to steal the competition from the upperclassmen."

"But I've gotten involved in doing Awa Odori."

"Ah, Awa Odori? Did you say ‘Awa Odori'?"

"That's what I said."

"...Why?"

"Because of Omaken. Together with Kaga-san."

"Kouko?"

Yanagisawa's eyebrows could be seen rising automatically. Surely thinking about how disagreeable things had been recently. Chinami seemed to be thinking along the same lines, and staring at him.

"Eh, Awa Odori? You're kidding, that's good, where might that have come from? They're doing wonderful things in many places, aren't they! Amazing, amazing!"

Turning a smiling face to Banri, her eyes innocently brightening, she started playfully moving her hands. It wasn't Awa Odori, *funny uncle, funny uncle, funny uncle you funny uncle, I couldn't even see you*. But.

"...Oka-chan, you're cute, aren't you..."

"Eh!?"

"...And besides, you're a good kid, right..."

"W, what!? What's going on!?"

"...But in truth, are you not awfully black-hearted? Aren't you hiding under that tattered clothing a lush body that wickedly leads boys around by the nose? Is there not blooming, deep in the Oka-chan jungle, its sinful nectar dripping down thickly, a Rafflesia flower?"

"Ehhh...!?"

"...Will it not bloom, the Oka-fflesia..."

"Y...yes!?"

"Hmph, is that so? You've really become Yana-ssan's favorite.", Banri saw Chinami's face go red in apparent confusion. She seemed to be feeling really awkward about part of the nonsensical compliments Banri had been spouting just now. Blinking her eyes, like a lost squirrel just come out of the woods tilting her head, she had both of her hands to her flushed cheeks. So was really cute doing that. Both in appearance and voice she's pretty, honest, innocent and true, and above all there's a very nice feeling about her. Warm, kind, and stable. Very much so. If they were already getting along, then they were the strongest players in the game.

Suddenly, he turned to face Yanagisawa.

"Yana-ssan. I somewhat understand your feelings..."

"So really, what are you..."

"...You'll understand..."

While he gazed down at Yanagisawa's stunned expression, Banri closed his eyes, exhausted. C-3PO, though, was unchanging inside, like Chinami, but its specifications had to have been built in. At least Banri thought so, though unfortunately, it's shiny golden body was a bit too much.

Rather, show off those wires! ...If he had anything to do with it, nobody else would be troubled.

* * *

Tuesday's second period, a lecture on law.

Afterwards, it being time to go and eat lunch together, Banri inserted himself between Mr. Two Dimensions and Yanagisawa, sitting shoulder to shoulder on a bench.

After skipping the period in spite of Law being a required subject, he had the devil's own choice of fourth or fifth period on Saturday, which was almost entirely freshmen (and, a few upperclassmen who'd failed before). Or so he supposed.

He stealthily opened the door in the back of the spacious classroom, so as to not make any sound to alert the professor. Looking over his shoulder, Banri noticed something was wrong. Kouko wasn't there. Crouching down because she was late, a girl he didn't know crept in.

Kouko had not yet materialized. Perhaps she'd taken the day off. Towards the middle of the lecture, in spite of a ban against it, he opened up his cellphone and below his desk started putting together a text message. "Aren't you coming to Law?", was all, without even any funny symbols.

Mr. Two Dimensions lightly poked him in the elbow. Then, with a mechanical pencil on a scrap of Banri's looseleaf paper, "Watcha wanna eat?" "Cafeteria food?" "Mos?" "I want rice." "A Rice Burger?" "Something else.", they wrote to each other in turns. Yanagisawa tapped the two of them lightly with his fingertip, getting their attention, he pointed over to the side with the tip of his pen. Chinami was right over there.

She kept a straight face, her pocket copy of "The Six Codes" standing on her desk so as to hide what she was doing with her fingertips. Whether stylish for the girls or not, she wore eyeglasses with thick black rims, the lenses jutting out from her face, and it seemed as if she were seriously hiding something she was doing, like sewing or knitting. Carefully moving her fingers in a practiced way, the girls seated to each side were looking on, seeming quite interested. "You're not really serious", she exaggeratedly lip-synched over to Yanagisawa. Mr. Two Dimensions watched Chinami for a little while too, then on the notepad wrote, "Yana's girlfriend? The Arale-chan glasses are a little odd, though in three dimensions they're cute."

If it weren't for the awkwardness, Yanagisawa would have said "Yeah, really." Lip-synching "You - are - wrong" with his hands to both sides of his face, he twisted his muscular body. It looked like he had already forgotten completely the embarrassing events of the day of the opening ceremony. And then, suddenly snatching away Banri's mechanical pencil, he scribbled.

"She's not my girlfriend yet!"

The emphasis made Banri secretly nervous. Yet, it was only part of it. There was also the matter of his mechanical pencil being used. The lead was spent. About 0.001mm had definitely been used up. Yanagisawa didn't notice the nervous aura about Banri, and was writing down even more nonsense.

"Though it'd be nice if there were any hope...if you know what I mean."

He laughed softly, grinning wide enough to split his face.

What was with that face?

Even saying "though", what are you up to? "If you know what I mean" shouldn't be allowed either. Writing it the way he did in particular should not be allowed. He had the urge to kill someone. Just as he was self-consciously composing his irritated face, the cellphone on his lap buzzed softly. It was an answer from Kouko.

"I'm not feeling too good today (sweat drop), so I'm taking a break (sweat drop)."

Reading that through reminded him of the state Kouko was in yesterday.

Getting to where she could hardly keep her feelings of jealousy under control, unfairly condemning both Yanagisawa and Chinami, and then, in that way, towards herself more than anybody or anything else, she looked like she was hating, feeling ashamed of, shunning and condemning herself. Her appearance shouted, "What's the use? What's done is done."

When in situations where others could see her, not a single drop of sweat would fall from her. Not for one moment would her smile fall. Reigning like a queen, she could not be ignored. Hiding herself alone, her whole body in a cold sweat from embarrassment and regret, unable to get up and come here this morning, there wasn't a single person in this world able to understand the clumsiness of such a girl --- but no, was there? To other girls, to this world, she was only one more.

Banri closed his cellphone and held it tightly. A person who had been able to glimpse all the abundant opportunities for this untrained girl.

Was there one around here?

"Chinami isn't just cute, she's interesting, she's got a good personality and a really good head. Seriously, she's just right for me!!!!!!"

---And here he was, scrubbing roughly with his erased the exclamation marks Yanagisawa had written so emphatically they'd extended out over part of the notes he'd taken from the blackboard, as if he'd gotten angry. "Ah, what!?", he muttered at Yanagisawa as he quickly erased it. Erasing while thinking.

Getting bothered by such a thing as this.

He was feeling irritated, even mad.

What is this state of so-called 'perfection'?

Having neatly erased back to the conversation with Mr. Two Dimensions, Banri turned a sullen face towards Yanagisawa. "What was that for!?", Yanagisawa cast a bewildered eye back at Banri. He had no idea just what he should be doing. He didn't know what he wanted to become. But no, he didn't want to get angry at friends, nor at Yana-ssan. But he wasn't able to control himself.

But if he were to write "But of course, he loves Kouko most of all. He will date Kouko and marry her.", would Yanagisawa be happy about it? Would it make this irritation go away? But simply thinking and theorizing about it wasn't going to make it happen.

It wasn't funny.

Not understanding at all what Kaga Kouko was to Yanagisawa, that wasn't funny.

But in the meantime--- he only barely understood women, immersed as he was in simple illusions about them. He was already drunk with an unbased sense of superiority, seeing that even though Yana-ssan could not understand the foibles of his childhood friend, he himself, having hardly met her, was understanding her. Though there was really no way she would want to come and check him out, he wanted to think there was.

He shoved his cellphone firmly into his back pocket.

Is there really such a thing as giving sympathy?

To become convinced that somebody else is quite like oneself, adding on their cares as if they were your own, getting close to that person, and feeling their pain as if it were your own. Is that what is called giving sympathy? If that is so, then sympathy seems to be quite selfish, and borderline hysterical.

Besides, one wouldn't have any control at all.

"If there's hope for Oka-chan, what about for Kaga-san?"

Taking back his mechanical pencil from Yanagisawa's hand, Banri scribbled in rough strokes. "Eh!", Mr. Two Dimensions looked towards Yanagisawa's face in surprise.

"Is there some connection between Kaga-san and *Yana*?"

"Kaga-san has wanted to marry Yana-ssan since they were kids."

"Wha!? What's that!? Are you kidding!?"

"Kaga-san is in LOVE with Yana-ssan"

"!?!?!?!?"

Yanagisawa wrote all over Banri's writing with his pen, erasing it. And then, frowning at Banri as if they weren't friends, he wrote boldly.

"I've told Kouko clearly whenever I've had the opportunity. Though I've always said it clearly, this time for sure, I made it clear. I made it understood. Because Chinami and I are thinking we really want to go out."

"Opportunity, when!?", Banri thought, unable to say anything from emotion, looking down at what Yanagisawa had written.

Kouko was nowhere to be seen around school Tuesday, nor Wednesday.

Perhaps it was just a little time to recover and come back, and the mail that Banri received was about Thursday night.

Chapter 5

Tada Banri has spotted me.

Being made fun of in a strangely confused moment in time while that long-missed seductive bell was ringing, while gasping in pain, Banri certainly saw me that day. And I saw him too.

The present and the past connecting in the middle of that bridge, Banri and I, our eyes met for only a moment. Mine, or possibly Banri's, maybe both side's mistake in vision, a bad guess, an accidental misunderstanding, a mysterious illusion, a common daydream, what he thought didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

Anyway, the memory of that moment in my past certainly exists. This phenomenon, whatever you might call it, as far as I'm concerned, is real.

* * *

Serenely, Kouko said she was trying to collect the objective facts.

"To summarize them, Mitsuo and I are bound by fate. That is to say, it's been proven over and over again."

With a thump, she put a big paper bag from a department store, packed full of stuff, on the table in front of Banri. The table shaking and creaking from the weight, an older gentleman next to them, an espresso in one hand, briefly looked towards them. "Excuse me...", Banri bowing his head in a working class sort of way.

A little before three in the afternoon, walking from campus a short distance to the café--- which had now become outrageously memorable, the shop where they served café-au-lait in bowls. Thinking that perhaps they shouldn't go there a second time, they peeked into other cafes but found them completely full, and they finally settled down here, where they thought they might be able to have a quiet conversation.

"If I can pile up enough objective truth before his eyes, I think even Mitsuo would not be able to avoid his responsibility. ...And you could say, being a little law-school-ish would be good right now, eh?"

Holding her bowl in both hands, sipping café-au-lait as if it were soup, Kouko could be seen smiling.

Taking his bowl in both hands like she was, Banri stared at her.

"...I couldn't get out even though I'd had enough of the lecture."

As if asking "What was that?", Kouko raised one of her beautifully cared-for eyebrows and looked back at Banri's eyes.

Between deep red lips, a line of pure white teeth. Smooth cheeks. The skin about her eyes was stretched smoothly. From her slim fingers, neatly manicured, to the line from her hips to her crossed legs, she was perfect in every way. Calmly returning her café-au-lait bowl to its saucer, she looked out the window, elegantly composed.

Since that "worst day", when they'd escaped their awful situation, four days had passed. Having taken a break, it seemed that Kouko had gotten back on her feet. However.

"Well then, Kaga-san, are you really feeling better now? With how you were feeling Wednesday and all, not attending and looking like you were going to fail the class! All the first years but you have been getting perfect attendance."

"I just had to have a little time. Alone, by myself, thinking. And I arrived at a conclusion that of course I did the right thing. It wasn't a mistake. It was just right. ...As long as I keep to my plans, things will have to work out!"

Finally up to the task, even if only in front of Banri, as if acting the part of "the Perfect Kaga Kouko", she slowly raised her chin and smiled with her whole face. He could not discover even one flaw, not one spot on her creamy white throat.

With Kouko at long last back to school, just like that, Banri was even more high spirited than he had been worried before.

Wounded by Yanagisawa's cold attitude, confused by Chinami's entry into the fray, and along the way, embarrassed by Omaken, he had felt that she must certainly have been feeling down. Those four days, Banri had been really worried about Kouko. The day before, he had even called out to Linda when he spotted her in the lobby, and while leaving out the details, consulted with her about what to do about Kouko.

Banri said that she seems to be lost, because she's so clumsy at it she's ashamed to join Omaken, and Linda replied, "Pressuring her won't do any good. But, it would be boring without a partner," with a nod. "If Kouko was so inclined, of course they would be happy, she would always be welcome, and it's OK if she's a bit confused up until when she agrees to join." Simply calling Kouko his partner, just that much was making Banri feel strangely embarrassed.

"What were you thinking about? There's no mistaking Mitsuo and I are bound together, just not completely yet. There's proof, such that nobody can evade, perfect proof."

Kouko was stubborn to the end.

Her straight-blown hair spilled right down her back, held by a hairband wrapped in a deep gray and purple satin design. In her dark brown hair, it really looked pretty. Then,

"Justice will be mine!"

She nodded vigorously, showing her enthusiasm. She was wearing a snow white blouse. Emphasizing the courtroom style, she had on a slender, mannish vest. And a black tie. And a black miniskirt, black tights and black high heels. She had the evidence stuffed in a paper bag, and carried a high-class brand of briefcase. Together with how she threw her head back, today's Kouko really, how can you say it? ... She seemed to be doing an impression of a sexy lawyer.

Banri even now didn't understand where Kouko got her certainty. The proof, the proof, she was saying, but in reality up to this point, seeing the so-called 'satisfactory relationship' that Yanagisawa and Kouko had, he didn't think there was such a thing in this world as pulling out "objective facts".

Rather, he didn't think a man's heart could be moved to one's own convenience.

Though thinking about it, he didn't want to say anything negative to this Kouko, just barely returned, finally, from getting back on her feet.

"Wellll...", carefully saying little, resting his chin on his hand, Banri's cellphone buzzed.

It was a text from Yanagisawa.

"*Yana*-ssan said the lecture is over. He's coming this way now."

"Did he happen to ask you if I was here too?"

"Yes, yes, he did", said Banri, nodding. Though it seemed she was coming to school, after the lecture they hadn't spoken but a bit. "What're we doing?", was all Kouko had said along the way.

Once he came alongside Banri, Yanagisawa answered frankly, "I wanted to talk with Kouko too, amongst other things." While he was speaking that way, he gave a brief glance full of meaning that even Banri wasn't fool enough to not notice. He couldn't recall even one time that Yanagisawa had actually wanted to talk with Kouko.

As if she were satisfied, Kouko's back became even straighter.

"Look at this, will you? Perfect. Of course, you've been worrying about me, for a long time. You've repented of how coldly you were treating me. And then, little by little, unknown to yourself, I have filled up your heart. That is quite according to our perfect scenario."

Then as she were just remembering it, she took out a hand mirror from her pouch, looked into it, double-checking her beautiful perfection. Eyes upturned, blinking repeatedly, trying to make a smile from ear to ear, then nodding as if in approval, she put away the mirror.

This latest development startled Banri.

"Ka, Kaga-san, well... of course you aren't going back again!? And then, there's that, look here, rather than waiting in vain for Yana-ssan, once in a blue moon..."

"What are you saying? At long last, after waiting for him, I can present my evidence to him."

With a smile quickly put back in place, saying "That's true, isn't it?", he had no choice but to shut his mouth once more.

Really, calling Yanagisawa here like this was bad. He had yielded to Kouko's excessive self-confidence, though she couldn't deal with being rejected over and over again.

Hoping for something like progress with Kouko, perhaps... no, never, won't happen.

Yanagisawa was planning to turn her down once and for all, here.

Besides, it seemed to Banri that during the time she was away from school, Yanagisawa and Chinami's relationship had been making progress, little by little. Even at the club drinking parties, it seemed, the two of them had had plenty of time to themselves. Since Yanagisawa knew all too well that Banri was supporting Kouko, he felt no need to mention it. In fact, he would not have been surprised if they were actually starting to go out together.

"...Anyways... shouldn't you not be getting your hopes up?"

Timidly, that was all he tried to say.

If he were untactful, Yanagisawa might have planned to come here together with Chinami. And then in front of Banri and Kouko, they would slap her with the announcement that they were a couple. If such a thing were to happen, what would Kouko wind up doing? Becoming perfect, and then, ...what would she become, really? For certain sorry, standing petrified, in a strange cold sweat.

As for Banri, since such a Kouko's near future worried him, he couldn't just decide things were getting uncomfortable around here and take his leave, claiming "This has nothing to do with me."

"Why? He didn't just come here this way perfectly. There's plenty of evidence."

Looking strangely hesitant, Kouko looked back at Banri's face, handling her paper bag as if it were something valuable.

"But it's 'proof'... otherwise why would I have brought it with me?"

And saying, "He's come!", she sat facing the doorway, her eyes shining.

"Mitsuo! Over here!"

When she stood up with a flourish, like an actress, the old man next to them, apparently unable

to deal with the noise, finally got up and moved over to the counter. "Sorry, really...", muttered Banri in a small voice that could hardly be heard.

Yanagisawa, his hair hanging down partway down the sides of his face, was standing in the entrance to the café. Raising his voice when he saw Kouko's face,

"Been a while, hasn't it?"

It seemed as if he were shrugging his shoulders while saying it. Chinami wasn't there, so Banri was able to relax for the time being. As he walked over to them, he jammed a knit cap he'd taken off into a pocket of his faded jeans. The heels of his well worn Red Wing boots made the floorboard creak.

Throwing her shoulders back, Kouko took a step towards Yanagisawa, keeping her perfect smile directed at him.

"Won't you sit down? What would you like to order? Mr. Defendant."

"Oh be quiet. Excuse me, could I have some coffee? Be normal."

"Hmph, you only just got here."

"I won't try to escape nor hide. You have nothing to be afraid of."

"Hey, what're you trying to say? Did I even set you free, or discover you hiding?"

"...Should I...really be here...?"

"It's OK! Stay here!", the two of them said at the same time, smiling, making Banri settle down and stop squirming.

In this meeting between the guy who was loved, and the girl whose love was unrequited, why was he here in the first place?

"Well then, prepare yourself. I will be understood completely. My perfection..."

"Something you want to say arbitrarily, as it were? Since it doesn't matter, I'll stay and listen."

"Anyways, sit down. Or have your feet cramped? Isn't it still early to be getting cold feet?"

"Huh? What have you been saying? Just why can't I have second thoughts?"

...Was this feeling like a duel?

Kouko's face smiling. Yanagisawa's face a mask. Giving each other exactly the same cool looks, they sat down, even their timing matching precisely, like mirror images. While between the two

of them the tension crackled as if there were unseen sparks flying, Banri, who had been watching from the start had been yawning repeatedly, exhausted from the stress. Oxygen simply wasn't getting to his brain.

Or rather, the scene these people were making, as if they were on good terms with each other, Banri didn't see it that way, not even for a moment.

Facing each other again, they always disagreed, would get to fighting and disputing. Somehow the two of them argued just like they were brother and sister.

"Well, let's start with me, OK? Let's start by stating the end goal. Mitsuo, who is recognized in truth as my lover, should be quickly and formally engaged."

Kouko preempted him with her perfect smile. Was she bewildered? Was she bashful? Were her delicate emotions wavering? Trampled by those high heels and flushed down the toilet! To all appearances, she was as self-assured as a fortress.

"These are the proofs. Look through it in order. Starting with where we were born."

Kouko pulled a file out of her paper bag, and Yanagisawa and Banri leaned over a map of a city center so they could see it.

"Here is the Kaga home. Here is the Yanagisawa home. In a straight line it's about eight hundred meters. Close from the start. The schools were together too. The probability of our getting to know each other in public elementary school was very high. In summary, our meeting was inevitable. It was determined from the time we were born that we would meet, somewhere. And it was fated that we would get together. We were classmates from elementary school onwards."

She turned a page in the file with her beautifully painted fingernail. There was a picture, glued onto some cardboard, a caption hastily written all around it.

"This was from the entrance ceremony. We're in the same picture, both of us. We were only eight years old. We still hadn't even spoken with each other at that time. At seven years old, a picture of an outing. A patron visit... Mitsuo's parents and my parents were together. After that, an athletic meet. Eight years old, nine years old, ...always together in pictures. Look at this, summer camp in our fifth year. Mitsuo, what's with such long hair? Then, this,"

"...Just what do you want to say?"

"Listen, just look. It's the graduation from elementary school! They took a picture of the two of us. We asked somebody to take it."

"You're sure drowning in memories looking at your album and remembering again. Just what's your point with all this?"

"Because of that, it's proof!"

"Of what?"

"Mitsuo and I are bound by this legitimate proof of fate."

Even when the file was closed with a bang by Yanagisawa, Kouko didn't turn off her smile.

"What I think about Mitsuo, in truth, has not changed. I've been that way since I was little, I was always together with Mitsuo. Remember when you confessed your love in first grade? Mitsuo said it, too. I love Kooko-chan, I'll be together with Kooko-chan from now on, you said, you'll become my bride, right, you said. You really did say it. Don't you remember? It was when we gave out presents at the Christmas party in first grade. You said it on the stage, my father and mother heard it too, even grandma heard it."

"...That, in the Christmas party, wasn't that a play!? That was a well-staged dramatization, so that your parents could hear."

"Ever since then, I've always been committed to getting married to Mitsuo."

"Look, Kouko. Between us, the dating thing won't work."

"But that was something between childhood friends. Again, I don't think I especially need to explain our relationship. That is something that goes without saying. Right?"

"Perhaps when we were children, we said things like that innocently. But, that was because we really were kids. Things like that could be said. But we're no longer little kids. Being a kid, wearing a uniform, going to and from school and studying; that's different from now."

"That's right. I understand that. We've grown up. Therefore, even in our relationship, we want to bring it up to an appropriately adult level."

"...'Bringing it up' or whatever, is something else though. "Loving" as a kid, versus "loving" now. I love Mr. Giraffe, I love Mr. Elephant, I love Kooko-chan... that happy time is already over. That's something normal; understand that. I mean, you can pretend to understand, or not."

"That's not it. Our relationship, ever since we were born, by destiny, for eternity, has been absolutely perfect."

"I don't understand where you get that from. I am fed up already, really, with your presumption. Because of it, how long have I been handicapped? First year middle school. Third year middle school. Second year high school. When there was a girl I liked, you'd interfere one way or another, quarrel with her, harass her, until you'd gotten her fed up with me. You even affected my friends, making them keep their distance. Thanks to you, all the way through graduation, not one girl would associate with me. I was truly left alone. As far as everybody was concerned, Yanagisawa Mitsuo had no choice in the end but to be Kaga Kouko's."

"Fooling around is not permitted. After all,"

"So! Already, it looks like you're telling me you're fed up with it!"

Kouko having once more opened the file, Yanagisawa roughly pushed it aside. Falling from the table, photos and memo-like things were scattered by Banri's feet.

"But, ...I haven't blamed you for what's happened until now. It's the past in any case. With childhood things in general, lacking judgement I made childish mistakes, drifting along, I think. I am thinking that now you should be taking responsibility for having come to my university, and certainly for your own life. Anyway, I am just telling you clearly in advance. I have the person that I like now."

"...It's me, of course?"

"Take it however you like. It's Chinami. It seems to me that a few times now you've tried to smear her name. If you so much as trouble her, put her on the spot, hurt her feelings or pester her--- if you try to separate her from me, I will not be happy with you. I will hate you, I will hate Kouko, eternally, absolutely and perfectly to the point where it will follow you even if you transfer to a different university."

Deliberately slowly so as to be heard, Yanagisawa with his finger as if setting a rhythm, stabbed out the words.

"I'm leaving you behind."

With a sharp sound, Kouko stood up.

She looked down at Yanagisawa.

"...Why?"

Her now visibly false smile vanished once, but then returned, stiffening.

"Why? What the, why such... what's with this? I don't get you."

Yanagisawa silently looked up at the scene. Kouko was breathing in gasps, trying to maintain her expression but her lips trembling more and more as she spoke.

"But, ...but, I don't understand. Am I not special to you? Do you remember that time you had such a big backpack on? Do you remember when you'd lost out because of your handwriting? Who comforted you then? When you were chosen to be a member of the relay team for the sports day, who baked the party cake? You dropped the relay baton, didn't you? Who of all the others knew that? That time the girls came in first, and our class came in first overall. Who was the anchor of the girl's relay team? Between "Mitsuo can see me" and all the cheering, I was always such a dunce. Who ran faster than anybody else?"

"I remember."

"You do!?"

"But, it's impossible."

"Well then! ...Then, when I was born and started writing love letters, who were they to...? To whom... do you know?"

Noticing that Kouko's fingers were trembling delicately where they touched the table, Banri involuntarily glanced up at her face. Looking, he saw how pale she had become. Her voice was shaking too. Even the café-au-lait bowl was rattling.

He didn't need to see this. Or rather, why was he being shown this? Banri hid his face, covering his eyes with one hand. He could only hear the trembling voice of Kouko.

"...You know this boy I've come to love since I was born, don't you? On the occasion of my ninth birthday party, the boy who took me home? When I was feeling down because I wasn't chosen to accompany on piano, the boy who for my sake brought from home an origami set? That boy... do you know him?"

"...But, it'll never happen."

"Wouldn't you know!? You were that person! The reason I was able to run so fast, the reason I want to be pretty, the one I wanted to love was you! You've always been special! To be bound to you is right! Otherwise, if it weren't so... it wouldn't be perfect! Unless I was perfect, then I would not be able to get you to love me! Then what was I to do!? So, so always, I, I've tried, perfectly... hey! Why am I not special to you!?"

Quietly raising his eyes a fraction, Yanagisawa gave Kouko a penetrating look. Banri wished he could leave. If Kouko had noticed how badly she was shaking, she probably would have gotten up and left long ago.

"Answer me! Haven't I loved you since I was little!? Wasn't I raised with you and for you!? And yet, why am I not special to you!? Why am I not even important to you!?"

"So please answer me!", she repeated over and over again, whining like a little kid, unable to listen and beginning to tremble pitifully.

Ah, no way, such a---

"...You, are you an idiot...?"

Of sympathy there was not a trace. His expression was one of anger. Yanagisawa was angry.

"I don't think you ever understood me. It was always just about you. For that reason, you don't understand!"

Standing up, pointing at her with his finger, to his tearful female childhood friend Yanagisawa spoke.

"This was a careful decision. Really and truly, from the bottom of my heart, I am doing this for you. ...I did it for you! Why don't you understand that!? Do you want to get hurt because you fail to understand something I'm telling you? You're not an irresponsible kid, so understand! In particular, don't be getting the wrong ideas just because I happen to care! I'm not going to talk about lovers, destiny or any such thing! Because in reality, it wasn't like that! We didn't even fool around, not once! That was because I cared for you! If I had not cared, then with the right atmosphere, and the right feelings, what might we have done, we could have wound up having some fun! But that I could not do! I don't think one can become happy just by doing that! Because of that, it was something I absolutely could not do! I don't want to do such a thing!"

"...Well, weelll,"

Banri couldn't look at Kouko's face.

"If I'm important... if I'm special, that... love, is something different...? Is it not permitted to include 'love'? Coming to love me, falling in love, loving one another, getting married, for eternity, speaking that way... why, can't it be? Is it not possible?"

Yanagisawa's reply was a shake of the head. Yanagisawa was crudely telling her that it would not work, the two of them together. Banri was thinking that Yanagisawa would understand just how much he was supporting Kouko. He wasn't blaming him, asking him to be flexible and not say such hard things. Because he was that sort of guy, maybe that's why he wanted to be friends.

"...Not possible...?"

A drop fell to the table.

"...This way, in spite of remembering our childhood...? Even though I'm special? In spite of that, there's no way? Then, then in short... it was my fault?"

That was how Kouko was defeated.

If she simply cried herself out, not her objectives, not her evidence, nothing would come to be more than a pile of papers.

"Because I was merely something to be despised? Then, to whatever extent you have memories, however long a time you give me in reality, there is simply no way? Could you not fall in love with me? If, if that's the case,"

In a small voice, he tried to call her. He was thinking it was time to give up. Kouko not knowing how to pull back, again sinking into depression before him, Banri wanted to hold her back. That is the reason I stayed here, he thought.

But that voice didn't seem to reach Kouko.

"If so, then I am already not needed! Always unneeded, always forgotten, done without! Made as if I never existed! If just one more thing happens to me that cannot be undone, I will be entirely gone!"

Hearing what seemed to be a scream in that voice, Yanagisawa said nothing more, rising from his seat.

Pulling his knit cap on his head nearly to his eyes, he swung open the door and went outside.

The inside of the shop suddenly went terribly quiet. He realized that the other customers all had their ears directed towards them, curious. Banri moved slightly, highly uncomfortable, when at that moment there arose the sound of Kouko gulping for air.

Bang, Kouko's hand struck her saucer, shaking it.

"...Just what have I done?"

Kouko watched Banri, covering her mouth. Opening her eyes, tears ran down her cheeks again, flowing down. Sorry, Tada-kun. Sorry. Sorry, sorry, so very sorry. Sitting down as if she were falling, she turned her crumpled face towards Banri, from the corners of her tightly closed eyelashes once more tears.

He was being apologized to, he understood at last. Banri searched within himself. The Banri who lived here as if nothing mattered at all, blowing up before that Banri's eyes was indiscreet, perhaps, but he wasn't hurt by Kouko's words.

"It's all right, Kaga-san."

"...I'm sorry...I'm sorry...!"

"Really, since it's OK. ...In such a time as that, you needn't worry about me."

"...Sorry, Tada-kun..."

Just now was nothing. You'll forget. You'll make it as if it hadn't happened. ---But it wasn't so easy to say that, the future being awfully difficult to manage.

* * *

Kouko stayed sitting there in the seat by the window.

Not knowing what else to do, Banri continued watching the tableau. The tears on her cheeks already dried, Kouko remained silent, her head hanging in shame, completely shut off from everything. Four o'clock passed, five o'clock neared, slowly outside the window it was starting to get dark,

"Good sirs, there are customers waiting for the non-smoking section..."

The café employee said to them apologetically. At last the time had come,

"It's about time we left, Kaga-san."

Banri prompted her,

"..."

Still silent, Kouko, instead of asking if they should get up and leave, went through the glass door that separated the smoking section. Bowing his head to the bewildered employee, the confused Banri followed her at once. For sure it was less crowded over here, with fewer customers and poorer ventilation, and an awful cloud of tobacco smoke and smell swirling about in the air.

"Hey, Kaga-san..."

Sliding into vacant seats,

"I thought smoking might kill you."

Distracted by Kouko's muttered words, uncomfortable smokers were looking their way.

"Err... noo, what did I say...? I didn't think such stuff was deadly, did I...?"

Having entered the smoking section with Kouko once again hanging their heads in shame, trading glances with the employees, Banri was embarrassed. If he were to order something more, would they let them stay here still? More importantly, was it all right if he stayed here still? Obviously dispirited, Kouko wouldn't want to go off by herself alone, but wasn't Banri's very presence a bother, as far as she was concerned? Perhaps what she needed was time alone to lick her wounds. If so, he wanted to disappear quickly.

Naturally, he wasn't thinking about "being needed". That she didn't require any human being apart from Yanagisawa Mitsuo even Banri understood. Worrying about Kouko, and wanting to keep an eye on her, was Banri's condition. He wanted to pay more attention to her condition than to his own.

Of course, it might be that he shouldn't be here--- a feeling that sitting too long a time, an ache arising from his rear just then,

"Want a smoke? Here you go, one shot!"

A girl they didn't know sat down next to them and extended her cigarette case towards Kouko.

"You wanna die? Use this stuff and you will. At the cellular level for sure."

"This person's not twenty years old yet..."

Confused for some reason, Banri blocked it. Kouko raised her head a bit, looking curiously at the cigarette case offered to her by that mysterious person. It didn't appear to be any major brand, like Mild Seven, or Marlboro.

"Boyfriend?"

Confused, Banri shook his head rapidly back and forth. The girl, with a cynical smile twisting her lips, spoke.

"Hey. You can call me NANA."

Thinking a bit, Banri,

Cough!

Expelling his breath as if punched.

He remembered while he was hospitalized, forever reading the latest issues of shoujo manga. Probably overdone, a short one-length bob hair style with longer bangs, dyed jet black and a leopard print camisole. Aggressively strong makeup. Heavy leather riding jacket. Neck to fingertips jingling with excessive silver accessories. She even carried around a guitar case. Her appearance, such as it was, was that character.

Such cosplay... but why here and now? Chosen over other things. Such a person. Was this café some sort of power spot to draw in such strange people? The more he looked at her, the more he had to restrain himself from laughing out loud.

"You could say you, well... for me, it was something for me to see. By chance right next to me... so to speak."

He looked towards her black fingernails. In the setting of her silver ring was a skull.

"...I'm not Linda's junior. You were with Linda in high school! I'm a third year. Or rather,"

Twisting her lips so as to direct the fumes upwards as she smoked, NANA... sempai explained her surprising name.

"Linda's first given name is pronounced NANA too."

"...That, are you kidding..."

Banri was becoming overwhelmed by the strangeness of it all,

At long last, a snort came from Kouko's nose. And then from Kaga Kouko he got the same strange vibes.

"Omaken, eh? I'm fed up to here with that. The Yosakoi and such were such a pain, didn't they make me feel like I wanted to die?"

"...What about this year's Awa Odori...?", replied Banri, to which she laughed scornfully.

"Even more so time to stop. For sure. If I'm gonna die, let it be by music."

And then, thrust before them, a cheap-looking black and white flyer.

"Today at nine o'clock. Nakano City. Though it's nothing more than an amateur student band, Awa Odori can die a thousand times in comparison."

"Ah, thanks... this is what they call a 'live show'... is it? But I've never been to such a thing... are you going too, NANA-senpai? Well, of course... does it seem like a typical cover band?"

"Whaddaya mean, 'cover band'. They aren't like a cover band. Cause I'm a poet. Poetry reading."

"Po, poe...? Huh...?"

"If you have this leaflet, you get two drinks. If you mention my name, you can get more. Come and die."

With a broad grin, she gave them the finger. NANA-senpai wore her character to the last, and leaving things as they were, left the shop. With only the leaflet left behind in Banri's hand, "What shall we do?", he said towards Kouko,

"Let's go and die."

Kouko plucked it from him. Her tear-reddened eyes, upset wherever they sat, desperate from having been put upon, understood.

"...If it isn't perfect, then I ought to remain broken to the end. Unlike how I've been up to now, I want to do absolutely nothing. No half measures. If I'm going to be smashed to pieces anyway, then I want to become nothing at all. I want to die!"

And then standing up, spreading their arms wide and taking deep breaths--- the people in the smoking section of course really looked like they hated them, Kouko making as if she didn't see.

"What will you do, Tada-kun? I'm going even if I have to go alone."

"...It's a date! Of course!"

Leaving Kouko like that alone was worrisome, besides, that's the way it was. If she wasn't perfect, instead falling to pieces, she would do nothing as if dying, but then she would want to be brought back to life. Banri, at least, always thought so.

* * *

Unable to say anything about honorable defeat while killing time nor over dinner, they went drinking at a cheap tavern afterwards.

"...W, what? Even in my thoughts it was never such a dodgy looking place..."

A little past nine o'clock, Banri and Kouko were standing before the live concert place. Trying to look inside through the entrance, Banri winced. The steps going down were dark.

Looking very much out of place, looking around nervously, she pushed on his back with both hands,

"It's OK, you'll be fine, no problems..."

Kouko made ready to go down the steps.

"Hold on, just hold on a bit more,", Banri said, planting his feet firmly in resistance. Even more than in his imagination, the real thing was considerably more hard core.

"Between dying and killing, were the fans of that student band on the same planet?", Banri was thinking. "The tension here, for the first time in my life 'live', so to speak, will eventually be over, right?" If they were to spend some time going crazy, then perhaps Kouko would unwind a little. That was the feeling he had.

However, there were no students to be seen amongst the other customers gathering around the entrance. For some reason, most were well built, like foreigners, with body piercings and tattoos seeming natural for them. They wore grim-looking riveted jackets and leather pants, had impressive figures with biceps like logs. Above their bald heads, a vapor arose from their sweat. Ordinary people appeared as fasting monks beside them, all skin and bones. Their mouths open as they stood around, they watched the petrified Banri with suspicious eyes, like buffalo-men with their huge shoulders, both tattoed with "guts" (why?) --- anyhow, everybody living in the ordinary world would never be able to meet such a variety of people as were here.

"We, we're really going...?"

He reflexively looked over towards Kouko, inquiring,

"Let's go, it's ok! It's O-K, let's go! It's all right if we goooo."

Kouko stood before him firmly, looked at him with clear eyes, and nodded like crazy.

Perhaps due to three whole hours of drinking continuously, her breath reeked of liquor. Her voice was a little slow, but for the time being she seemed the same old Kaga Kouko. Her makeup was a little smeared from crying, but otherwise to every last aspect she was perfect. "Fuu... haaa...", she sighed, though she wasn't collapsing yet, in spite of having recklessly drank virtually everything on the menu, from fruit sours to cocktails. Banri, feeling dizzy on the way, had switched to an oolong tea, but Kouko kept drinking alcohol until she was finally full. Could she hold her liquor that well?

"Hey let's gooo! Let's goo! Tada-kuun, hey, it's OK, it's O-K, it's oookaaayyy."

Almost as if she were throwing a fit, Kouko started impatiently stamping her feet. He sensed several gazes turning towards them. Not wanting to be something oddly conspicuous,

"...OK, OK, let's go for it!"

For the time being, going through the entrance looked almost like running away.

Going down the steps leading to a basement, putting his weight against the heavy door and opening it,

"Wow! So loud!"

He couldn't even hear himself shout. For the first time in his life, the live music detonating around him, it truly was an eye-opener. Shaken by the violent oscillations from his spine to his skull bones, his feet froze with instinctive fear. Kouko's eyes opened wide, she covered both her ears with her hands, and shouted things like "Kyaa!" and "Hyaa!". Even grabbing each other by the arm and getting closer, they really couldn't hear their voices.

The crowd of sweaty, hot and smelly people pushed them aside as they were leaving, but with that energy they entered all the quicker. Tossed about by the subterranean rumbling, they felt like their bodies were floating. And yet here they were, still only at the reception desk. Inside the exploding storm, a pair of middle-aged people of unknown nationality were standing, as if confused, watching money being passed across the counter. So then, it's not free?

The confused Banri pulled out his wallet, and showed them the leaflet he'd received from NANA-senpai. Rather than taking his money, they gave him two drink tickets. And then, *bam*, with some sort of stamp-like thing, they were branded on the backs of their left hands. But, anyhow, to conceal themselves somewhat, they lowered their heads a little and the two of them went further inside. If they were to stand still, they had a feeling they would wind up angry.

And then, they were overwhelmed by the most terrible noise. Finally they covered their ears, realizing it was as if their brain tissue on both sides were being pounded upon. Had the other

customer's ears been destroyed already? They seemed entirely unconcerned. Only Kouko and himself seemed to be nervous country bumpkins. It was scary, really. In any case, everything was scary.

"Though Kaga-san might be okay, I'm not okay!", he said, thinking he should stick really close to his one and only companion, but Kouko was looking around restlessly, and indifferent to Banri, she tossed her bag neatly into a locker. Crouching down by the lowest step, she stuffed her bag of evidence in and then kicked the door roughly to close it. To judge by the noise, her ladyship might even have broken it. And it looked like she'd forgotten to pull out the key.

Banri hurriedly stuffed his bag in with hers, pulled the key from the locker and put it away firmly in his pocket. For some reason, Kouko was moving restlessly, twisting around. There was nothing out of place with her ladyship, but she was straining to tear her black tights in several places, making holes in them.

As Banri looked on in mute amazement, she undid her necktie and opened her blouse widely, exposing much of her chest. Removing her hairband, her hair unfurled like a lion's mane. Roughly combing her hair with her hands, the combed back hair standing up and swelling, she suddenly got a wild look in her eyes. And then she rubbed roughly around her eyes, the long-ago messed up eye shadow, mascara and such smearing to where her eyebrows disappeared.

In some ways proud of herself, she showed off her look to Banri. The normally perfect Kouko vanished, suddenly a dangerous punk rocker girl. Passing on inside, going past a row of five women with lip piercings, the atmosphere hardly changed. Arriving back at the center of the chaotic noise, nobody batted an eyelash.

"...Well then, me too..."

Kouko didn't really want to disguise him, but for the time being she just messed up his hair with her fingers too. But since his hair was as limp as cat fur, nothing came of it.

Glancing at each other's faces and nodding, they once more proceeded inside. Over towards the stage, all you could see were the backs of the spectator's heads, like waves on the surface of the ocean. Because of all the noise, not even by shouting could one be heard. Approaching the bar counter, passing their drink tickets to the bartender, they were mutely shown a plastic menu. Pointing at beer, he showed it to Kouko too. Kouko chose a Moscow Mule. They were each handed a fresh cup.

"Kaga-saan! Cheeers!"

At any rate, even if they couldn't hear, he raised his voice, Kouko shouted something too, and the two of them raised their cups to their lips.

Just then a group of people surged towards the bar, hitting Kouko firmly against the back of her head. Kouko spouted her cocktail all over Banri's face. While shouting something, she took her

tie and wiped Banri's face briskly. They went back over to the bar. It was entirely drowned in the noise, Banri's ears had gone deaf, he couldn't hear anything anymore.

Leaning against the counter, Kouko got close to the bartender's ear and said something as loud as she could. Her torn tights peeking from beneath her miniskirt, she raised her heel and shook her high-heels. Disheveled, half of her beauty was hidden by her wild hair. While feasting his eyes on her, he noticed a big guy with tattoos all over his upper body approaching Kouko. Banri, though a powerless knight (his finishing move was to lie down and play dead), looked ready to rush over in heroic resignation when,

"Tsuzaaeeeenja, neeeeeeooo! Uruuuaaaaaaaaaa!"

---Between the songs, several seconds of silence, just like an air pocket. Wrung out from Kouko's throat came a howl, as if from the earthbound ghost of a female cat which had died in a particularly cruel manner.

That voice. No, that face. Her disheveled hair starting to flap against her cheeks, her large eyes bordered in pitch black glaring and glittering wet. Is this how a wounded beast feels? Really, you look like you fit in this place, Kaga-san... Banri reflexively gasped.

Rebuffing the tattooed man, she took four cups in her two hands and suddenly struck a pose while turning back towards him. Twisting her narrow waist left and right, she said "Aha☆ ", her whole face a smile. Giving an obvious wink, she returned to Banri's side. Her white chest swelled outwards, restrained by her tight vest. The shadow was terribly bewitching.

Really drunk she is, this person.

For a good while now, deeply drunk, even more than he thought. Even deeper than she seems to be, looking at her.

"Ka, Kaga-san, wait a sec, though it's late, is this really OK!? Aren't you drinking an awful lot!? I mean... wow, that's loud!"

With what seemed like an explosion of sorts, they started singing loudly once more, and while he started to crumble from the knees up again, Banri shakily extended his cup towards Kouko. Kouko was shouting out, "NANA-senpai", or something. And with a smile, she drank up the contents of one cup. "Oh...", unintentionally having watched over Banri, she fluttered her hand as if to say "Drink drink!"

Banri too, if that's how it was going to be, bringing it to his lips,

"...Buhaa!"

This time, Kouko's face got sprayed. "Gyahaa!", Kouko's face dripping while she clapped her hands and bent over double, laughing uproariously. But that wasn't all. His throat burned, his nose was sore. He was dizzy. His ears hadn't been able to hear anything for a long time. It was

as if his five senses were entirely paralyzed. "What's going on!?", Banri staggering as he tried frantically to support his body with his own two feet. Up to this point he'd drunk such things as beer, sour, highballs, and so on, but definitely not sake. And strong sake this was, like fire.

Kouko's face seemed unconcerned, gulping down the same stuff. "But, drink up, I suddenly feel as tired as a stone!", sitting down.

"Whoa Kaga-san! Be careful, very careful! I mean, what, what was that!?"

Confused, while taking her hands and trying to help her stand up, he looked back towards the bartender. While the bartender lady was using the same kind of cup to give something to drink to a customer, she stuck out her tongue at Banri and Kouko. Doing two things at once, the odd glittering must have been from her piercings.

Banri finally arrived at the conclusion that perhaps it might be better if they just left. With everything to this point, she might have unwound enough, and already it seemed about the right time for her highness.

"Kaga-san, let's go already! Eh!? Kaga-san!? Kaga Koukoo!? You're not here!"

When he turned around, Kouko wasn't there, and he looked around in confusion. Cup in one hand, he staggered around, looking through the gaps between the other spectator's backs for long hair.

"Just a second, just a second! Hold on, wait!"

On the stage three guys were waving chainsaws around. The tiresome fellow playing the drums was sneaking out, looking down his nose at it all. As if spurred on by that atrocious noise, the spectators on the completely-filled floor raised their fingers high, jumping up and down, in spite of the disdainful look, raging for unknown reasons. Kouko was rapidly heading into the middle of all that.

"Ka, Kaga-saan! Wait! Hold on!"

Banri shouted, his voice quickly swallowed up. On the stage the maniacs were jumping up and down to make things even crazier, then jumping down hard on the heads of the spectators below. Or rather, falling down. Between the hands of the crazy ones, their unforgiving faces and slamming into their heads, Banri was making no progress at all.

"Miiiitsuuuuoooo is a fooooollllll~~~~~!"

"Scram", shouted Kouko in a slurred voice, trying to climb up on to the stage over the skinheads in the front row. Her shoes were long gone. And then,

"I'mmmm going to diieeee~~~~~~! Ugyaaaaaaa~~~~~~~!"

"You've got to be kidding, this is the end.", said Banri, beginning to give up.

Welcomed by the chain saw squad as if she were their queen, Kouko dumped the contents of her cup over her own head. She threw away the cup, stuck out her tongue, and gave the finger with both hands. She threw her head back as she were stabbing with all her might at the heavens. The cheers shook the ground. The focus of the drummer's eyes, Kouko's miniskirt, was dangerously near her butt, and in a moment, all at once the problems increased. Her bra was black. Just a fleeting glimpse of her chest was seen. And then, both hands lifting up even higher, her neck and her chattering knees, that... that, was C-3PO's pose!

Banri climbed up, as if he were jumping on people's backs with his Jack Purcells. He went towards the stage. Not quickly enough to stop Kouko, that just wasn't possible.

Sopping wet, bathed in sake from the head down, Kouko inspired the band to dance like robots. For just such a moment, even their rhythm was chopped up. The chainsaws growled more and more violently. Any time now, it seemed he would be able to jump to midstage with a running start. Banri barely managed to reach the stage. Stretching out his hand to jump,

"Kaga-san, don't, don't!"

He grabbed Kouko's wrist.

He put his weight into it, all at once, taking her by one hand. His body was drawn close.

He had a feeling such a thing had happened before. Even before, even that before...? The crowd was just like--- around dawn, at the river water's surface.

If he were to fall, he would die. Die completely.

"I'm scared----------!"

Crying like a child, shamefully, who was it? Me? Kaga-san?

---Banri!

"..."

Kouko's eyes were looking at Banri.

Standing his ground, Banri also looked at Kouko.

Had somebody been calling him like this? With all the alcohol, it felt like flames dancing around, spinning inside his head. Sparks whirled about, everything he felt, everything he saw, anything and everything, just like that caught fire. What was it? How many things, in a hurry, without

time, are burned, vanish and are lost? No way! Already he was truly lost, not understanding. Since he did not understand, he didn't want to hear anything more. From the beginning, it would have been good for him to not have existed.

Ah, so it was.

Always, nothing but loss---.

"Tada, kun...?"

Kouko was murmuring in a small voice. ...Murmured, sort of, her mouth could be seen moving. Their hands were still joined, the moment seeming to stand still, but,

"If you're going to die, then die quickly, you idiots. This stage is mine."

Jabbed forcefully in the lower back, Banri was pushed off the stage. And of course, Kouko together with him.

As they quickly fell down, with the guitar used to poke Banri in one hand, NANA-senpai could be seen with the mike in hand, grinning like a demon.

At the front entrance, Banri collapsed.

Stepping over the collapsed Banri, creeping down the unlit corridor, groping for the bathroom, Kouko could be heard entering.

"Are you okay...?"

"..."

Instead of a reply, one more time. Bravely.

Kicking off his shoes to get them off, still unable to stand, he somehow managed to enter the room, following the wall. His hands had gone completely numb. Supporting Kouko, he had walked here all the way from the place of the concert.

Falling to the floor with a thud, he rolled over on to the rug. The sound of the water pouring, the sound of the toilet flushing. And still he groaned, painfully.

Feeling a random pain where he sat, it felt like something was there. Sticking his hand in his pocket, out came the key to the locker.

"...Ah... we did it... the stuff in the locker, we left it, didn't we... hey, Kaga-san, again, we forgot something..."

There was no reply.

To block his feelings he covered his ears, drawing himself inside, and unnoticed, Banri's eyes seem to have closed.

* * *

When he woke up, he felt vague.

Still lying on the rug, he felt so heavy he only lifted his eyelids. The world was still in middle night, and in the room light did not penetrate; it was dark.

Kouko was in a corner of the dark room.

Leaning her back against Banri's bed, sitting on the floor, she looked outside through the door-wall. She was crying.

Elbow propped on a partially raised knee, chin in one hand, the other hand combing her bangs, the light from outside the window illuminated her cheek, tears running down it. Her throat sounding hoarse, her nose running, the fingers of the hand supporting her chin twisting her lips, Kouko kept on sobbing.

Even though Banri was waking up, she probably didn't notice. Just one person, huddled in the deeps of solitude, not caring what others see, that figure still crying defenselessly, marvelously, looked rather like a young boy.

In other words, just like me, Banri thought.

Though nobody should be crying aloud like that in this room, it felt as if here were split entirely in two, and he were watching himself cry.

Long ago, perhaps he had cried like this, what he was seeing on the other side of the room. This he knew: this had happened. Such feelings had come over him.

Like a pale, thin film covering the corner of his vision, just then,

"'Re'...?"

A faint glimmer, a mysterious single syllable came to mind.

When he raised his shoulder, a towel-blanket fell down. Kouko must have draped it there. Kouko, at Banri's voice, raised her tearful face as if taken aback.

"...Just now, what did you say...?"

By what was certainly the voice of a little girl, Banri's strange dream was quickly destroyed.

"...Said..."

"...You said 're'."

"...Your hand. Look..."

Banri pointed at the back of Kouko's hand. Bending her wrist and looking at the back of her hand, "This?", she said hoarsely. There was a faintly glimmering fluorescent yellow 're' symbol there.

"Ah. You too..."

At Kouko's word, he tried looking at the back of his own hand. For sure, the same 're' glimmered faintly. Was that so? Was it the stamp from the reception desk at the concert place? To make it easier to recognize in the darkness at reentry time, it was of fluorescent paint. "Now I see", Banri started to nod his head.

"I mean... why 're' of all things..."

"Who knows..."

Without a single sound in the room, the two of them stared at their respective 're's for a little while.

Were they able to think quietly this way because it was the dead of night? Was it because they were barely breathing? Or, was it because their ears had been beaten down by that awful noise? ...That, probably.

"..."

Staring at the back of her hand, it seemed she would start sobbing again. Was the syllable 're' a switch that had enabled all of her grief? Re... Being on good terms with Mitsuo would they go to 're'staurants? Being on good terms with Mitsuo would they go to pick 'le'mons? Would they watch a 're'ntal DVD, would they ecstatically dance the 'Re'njishi, or zap eggs on the 'ra'nge---

"Kaga-san... are you okay?"

"...Sorry. I was thinking about Mr. Two Dimensions just now."

"W, what? That's surprising... I mean, that doesn't have anything to do with 're', right?"

"No. There's no connection. Something Mr. Two Dimensions said, I suddenly remembered it...

then, I started crying again."

Turning a sort-of smiling but tear-stained face towards Banri, Kouko straightened her legs and sat down neatly.

Leaning her back against the bed, she slowly tilted her head back, as if it were quite heavy.

"Mr. Two Dimensions will not become Mr. One Dimension. He seems he said that to get things right, to his own satisfaction, that he would have to create his own dream girl. As for me, while hearing that as half joking, I thought we were somewhat kindred spirits. 'I want to be bound to a perfect companion with a perfect scenario'... saying that he and I are going for the same thing, I thought. But Mr. Two Dimensions, since he's what they call an 'otaku' boy, he works in the world of literary creation. Since I'm not an otaku-ish girl, I work in reality. That's different from a simple preference in hobbies, I thought. Enjoying himself in creating fiction, Mr. Two Dimensions is still rather childish, even, it seems. But, ...its not like that, is it?"

Combing her disheveled hair as if it were a nuisance, while looking up at the ceiling, in a low voice she continued talking.

"He was always more mature than I, an adult. That was how I understood him to be. Apart from me, nobody can imagine stuffing the perfection I dream of into their bodies. In the real world, it cannot be done. The world, in it's own selfish way, cannot do it. What would human relationships become if they were forced to be so? ...For Mr. Two Dimensions, or rather, a person barely come of age, assuming he has that sort of understanding, would be able to enjoy talking about it. In spite of my being of the same year, because I'm an idiot, there is sooo much that I don't understand. I don't understand why Mitsuo doesn't like me as I am. From the very start, I haven't understood how one can say, "I have not been able to make my dreams come true."

That hurt a lot.

All of it.

Still looking up at the ceiling, still crying, Kouko's voice could be heard awfully, painfully blocked.

"Mitsuo, did he not say that I matter to him? 'Because I cannot have happiness, I cannot love either.' Didn't he say something like that?"

"Yeah... he did, didn't he? I think so."

"After hearing that, I got to thinking. I had never thought whether or not Mitsuo would be happy. I had simply been chasing Mitsuo around saying I loved him. But, could you say that I was really thinking about Mitsuo's well being? I had never respected Yanagisawa Mitsuo as a human being, as an existence in reality. My goals were all that mattered. ...Perhaps I failed to

understand that he had a life, an existence. It might be that I was treating him as no more than one of the characters in my own world."

As if she were grasping at nothing, Kouko reached out her left hand in the darkness. The 're' waved in the air.

"Crying like this, getting hurt like this--- my obsession is to blame. This... ugly... obsession. ...The Mitsuo whom I love must love me. I would not accept that the one I love does not love me back. I would not accept that I am worthless. I would never recognize, never accept my being so. "Tell me... Tell me it isn't so... Tell me that I'm not worthless!" Saying such, I was only pushing the responsibility on to Mitsuo. Nonetheless, it was actually me who could neither accept nor forgive myself. I was arbitrarily judging my worth by whether Mitsuo loved me or not. Unfortunately, I had set things up that way. ...What I did to Mitsuo for a very long time was wrong."

Panting, Kouko continued, "but it took me a long time to realize that." Whether she was crying or smiling, Banri could no longer tell the difference. Still, her breathing was making a lot of noise in the darkness.

"...Well, is that not so? Everybody, to some extent, has such feelings, don't you think?"

While looking at his own 're', Banri was trying carefully to speak gently, to seem as optimistic as possible. Whether he managed to console her or not he did not know, but that was the idea that came to him right then.

"...As I am now, I agree, but then again, for whom would it not be very difficult normally? I think it's hard! Being imperfect myself, if I were not to face it myself, I would cease to be, so to speak. Wouldn't nearly anybody want to look away? ...At least, I am like that."

I am like that.

Having put it into words, looking away from reality and being surprised, his own form all at once came sharply into focus. That person, 120 pounds of meat, was stretched out on the rug.

His breath was catching, but if he went silent here,

"I have a really hard time noticing it when I am rejected."

Now, making a speech to Kaga Kouko, he found that he had averted his eyes from his own form.

As if staring off into the darkness, Kouko was looking at Banri's face.

"'Rejected'... by whom? A person like Tada-kun, was rejected by somebody?"

"...Those the old Tada Banri knew. The old Tada Banri was thought well of by many people.

His family and so on. I think it can't be helped, though, but... of course it hurts, and so, I cannot return home. They don't even understand. My parents, are even now waiting for the 'real Banri' to return and say, 'I'm home!' Because my current self, however I am introduced, I get this feeling of 'that isn't him.' That at any moment, the real son, Tada Banri himself, just like that, will return to them---"

Bringing up her knees, it was almost the old Kouko sitting there, resting her elbow on her knee. She propped her chin with her hand. Every time she talked, her head rocked back and forth.

"---It seems to me as if they were wishing for my current self to disappear, as if he had died."

With what he was putting into words, in the bottom of his heart, deeply submerged and unseen, his grief was coming into view, very quickly and clearly taking shape.

He didn't want to say he was afraid, he didn't want to see even one such word leak out of him.

"In truth all along, I haven't been able to avoid being scared, really scared! My personality, so easily vanished, at any time could easily return to me, right? After all, if I were cured, wouldn't my current self just die? Myself, dying... wouldn't everybody else be happy? What with myself, staying myself, wouldn't everybody feel forever dejected? Myself, myself in such a world, what's the word, pr, ...predicament, nowhere else, nothing, you could say,"

"Being dejected like that, stop it!"

...That was dangerous. Really.

If Kouko had not spoken up so strongly, who knows what may have happened to the rage that had been welling up inside him, which now turned to tears, overflowing from his eyes.

"I’m stopping! I stopped. Absolutely."

Wiping roughly at the back of his hand, he noticed Kouko sitting up straight in the darkness.

"Well, if Tada-kun were to disappear entirely, ...this evening was a disgrace, for me, for us. I want to keep a night like that a secret. Wouldn't it be better not to tell anybody? Nobody else! Not in this life, nor anywhere, nobody but Tada-kun! Nobody at all."

"..."

"Shall we? So we shall. Really!"

"Ah,"

---Thank you. Kaga-san.

Rescued, Banri rubbed his eyes with his fingers as if he were still lost.

"So, don't disappear. Don't die either. Don't be afraid of such things. They aren't going to happen! Because I, absolutely, will not forget Tada-kun. And then for me, for myself, who was a fool, who was ashamed, for me who could not help myself this evening, for me who only once this spring---"

With a single sob, Kouko took a deep breath, for reasons he did not understand.

"Whatever happens, don't forget me...!"

Still not understanding, this moment was ending.

"...I won't forget! I simply cannot forget. How could I forget? As for myself, well,"

As the words came out, Banri was thinking of something else.

"Kaga-san, I love you!"

Even if it were remembered, even if it were forgotten entirely. The results were always the same.

Having moved too quickly, he could not go back. Today, in this moment already, never again.

At the very same instant, he was being born and he was dying. No matter how important it was, no matter how he wanted to stop ahead of time, it all was lost equally. In fact, nobody could change things.

But, for that very reason,

"...I love you! Kaga Kouko. Really."

She was dear to him.

Kouko opened her eyes wide, the 're' on her hand covering her mouth. It sure was, though Banri also. It was a big surprise. Absolutely safe, they said, and suddenly it was a thing neatly and completely cut as if by a razor.

But, he loved Kouko.

However it happened, Banri loved Kouko. In his head and in his heart, if he were to notice, he was full, full of Kouko. He was full to bursting. Nothing but an awkward, klutzy, beautiful woman, every day he was thinking of her. Without realizing it, he had become like this.

And then, if he could, he wanted Kouko to become so too. He wanted her to think only of him. It didn't have to be today. Someday would be fine.

"...Saying such things. To confess on a night like this, that wasn't very honest of me. Sorry."

Dragging along his towel-blanket, Banri placed himself as far away from Kouko as he could. Making it to the wall, he sat down with his knees up once more.

Dumped, then on the same day getting drunk and going to a guy's place, then that guy saying he loved you. So cliché. Such a dangerous situation. He figured Kouko must be scared.

He threw his feet and hands out feebly, since he had not the spirit to take advantage of this night, and it was his intention to make an easy to understand appeal.

"Though I'm not speaking of forgetting, nor any such thing. Nor was it my intention to pretend nothing had happened. ...About what just happened, I don't think you are suddenly going to forget about Yana-ssan. I mean, it's all right if you turn me down for now. Ah, though that wouldn't be pleasant. ...Anyhow, there's tomorrow."

"T, tomorrow...!? Tomorrow!? What!?"

"Don't we have to pick up our stuff? It's probably in the locker where we left it. Don't you remember?"

"B, bags...!? Eh!? We did!?"

"Yes, we did. I mean, didn't we leave the stuff behind when we escaped the whole mess? How about that for fate?"

Tilting her head in puzzlement, Kouko,

"...If you call it that... yeah, something, over again. About the same thing. But still rather nice, ...should be fun for me."

Little by little, she began to laugh into the darkness with a softly shaking voice.

"Whatever we left, it looks like it'll be okay in the end. It seems we're unexpectedly sturdy. I mean, we only lost our shoes. Again, in fact!"

Her voice had gone rough from crying, but nonetheless Kouko kept on laughing. She got Banri laughing too. Wanting to cry, wanting to laugh, his chest hurting, he was scratching his head in confusion. Touching the tip of his nose, his bangs were too long.

Perhaps they were waving for Kouko.

But, as for himself, loving her was not something he could stop.

But even if they could not be lovers, being friends would be good, to pass time together.

And so--- after this again, how many things had they left behind? He wondered how many things they had left behind, how many times had the two of them fallen down? It didn't matter. He

wanted to be with Kouko even so. That being so, he loved Kouko. Thinking on that, Banri smiled once more.

How many moments he could spend with her he did not know, though all of them were surely going to shine brilliantly.

So they could shine, she had been born. If he were to blurt out something like that, as if joking, now it might honestly be believed.

"...It's about that time, isn't it? The first train will be leaving shortly, Kaga-san, so you can get back. I could walk you to your place! Won't the others there be worrying about you? Have you called?"

"It's okay. I'll take a taxi back."

"Do you want to take a shower? I swear on my life I won't peek through the keyhole!"

"I said it's okay. Though we were a disaster, I won't contaminate the taxi seat. Really, thank you. Excuse me."

"For what?"

"For a lot of things, for everything. ...Really, it's okay, down this street, then I'll be able to catch a taxi. I'll be fine by myself, for sure."

Before Banri could begin to get up, Kouko looked all around her, mumbling about her bag. And then, brushing her long hair from her face in annoyance,

"That so? It got left behind."

"Tomorrow evening, let's go pick it up together! I mean, together we can go down there."

"It's okay, it's okay! I can go by myself!"

"Why? I'm not going to do anything. I was only going with you to the taxi stop! While we're at it, I want to go by convenience store. Ah, I feel like getting some ice cream."

"Go to the convenience store tomorrow! ...With how we look after today's disaster, I absolutely don't want to be seen in the light!"

"Since I've already seen enough unpleasant stuff, I'm fine. Besides, it's a bit late for that, what with that C-3PO act on the stage."

"Ewww! No way!"

For Kouko it was indeed a bit late, covering both ears and keening. Just like that, she trotted

across the room, heading for the entrance. Chasing after her in confusion,

"Hold up, hold up, hold up! Put these on!"

In a corner by the entrance some convenience store sandals were lying, jumbled together. He tried to turn on the lights, but Kouko cried, "No no no!", and in order to escape she flew out the entrance door and was gone.

"See you tomorrow! I'll absolutely see you here!"

Called like that even, it didn't look too bad. Reluctantly, he intently watched Kouko get on the elevator from his door, and once it started down he went over to the veranda.

Kouko came out the entrance, dragging the sandals as she turned towards the sidewalk. On the roadway, redly lit by the free taxi sign, just one taxi waited. She got on that one.

Banri, pulling in his head with a feeling of relief, he nonetheless noticed that Kouko could be seen looking up from the taxi window. Of course she looked, or something like that he understood, but Banri calmly waved to her. He wondered if she saw it. He decided she hadn't.

* * *

The topic of the day--- you cannot deny the signs, he thought.

As he walked, gazing out at the scenery, a tea plantation spread out before him, fluffy green domed stripes continuing into the distance, Banri was thinking. It smelled strongly of manure. "Hmm, what I see, what's that?", the tall electric fans for protection against frost looked down upon him, noticing and investigating him.

And then, afterwards, unable to stand it any longer, escaping--- because they were there.

He took Hikari from Tokyo station to Shizuoka, arriving in under an hour. After taking a breather at the Starbucks by the transfer gate, he took JR who knows more stations. His home station's monument: a tea bush disguised as an onion top. Apart from that, everything around the place seemed to say "tea".

To get home took not quite two hours. Some people do a lot of commuting, to school or to work, in their worlds, perhaps. A season ticket for the bullet train cost money, and Banri was on an allowance. In truth, he didn't have much choice. Nevertheless, he wanted out of the house, and that was the reason he gave Kouko.

"THE Shizuoka", so called, felt like walking through a tea plantation, some building's eaves

extending out, trying to be seen as a town.

He entered a lane deeply shadowed by fruit trees, through an open gate and went to open the door. It was unlocked.

"...I'm hooome..."

Speaking of remembering, he was already remembering.

"This is home!", he'd been told, and since for one year he lived there, the memories of that time had already given him the feeling it was "home".

He was taking off his shoes so he could surprise his mother when she came out,

"...What are you doing!?"

"I had some free time, and for some reason I came back here."

"Eh!?"

She stared in wonder at the son who had suddenly come back from Tokyo for no particular reason.

He only had enough for one way of the round trip... that was Banri's real reason for coming, but mother didn't care in the least.

By the morning after his confession to Kouko, he was feeling acutely embarrassed, remembering it. They'd arranged to meet up that evening, but he had no idea what they could have talked about if they did. In the how many hours until the evening, he didn't even know what to do to make it a lively occasion.

If that's the way it is, then let's go home, he thought. Going home for a bit, until the evening time would certainly cease to flow, the wait filled with conversation. Frankly, they talked too much. Though he didn't feel the need to run away from the memories of last night, at least for the moment he was able to escape from living alone.

And besides, afterwards, there was one more thing.

"I haven't eaten aaanything since morning. I wanna eat something."

"Why so sudden? If you're coming back, then call and tell me you're coming back! I'm going over to Grandma's place to work in her garden this afternoon! Since you're back, you want to come too? The season has just arrived, and it's a real mess over there."

"It's okay, I'll pass. Today's just a visit. I've got things to do this evening."

"Eh? What's that? Is that so?"

Having asked for food, and having said a few things to butter up his mom, he went up to his second-floor room.

There was something he thought he ought to look at.

Throwing his small solitary bag on the bedspread, he had no choice but to open the room's closet, filled with one year's worth of memories. Having taken to his new home only plain clothing, his high school uniform was hanging there, placed neatly in order. His mother had done that, of course.

He then pulled out a cardboard box. Pulling it out on the floor, he ripped off the tape and opened it. A broken cell phone and a high-school graduation album, stored away as remembrances, perfectly preserved.

How many hours before?

In the quiet of his home, he'd received a text from Kouko. The message, perhaps because of the tension of the morning, maybe due to the hangover, was awfully long. In that place, such a sentence it was.

'Thinking about things like being rejected, refusing Tada-kun would be pretty much the same thing.'

Reading it, he did not understand it right away.

He considered it for a while, thinking. Almost certainly he had to another person--- the Banri from before knew many people, perhaps that Banri had rejected someone, so to speak.

That he had lost all his memory of the time when he was living in this room was a pain he could not avoid. He even worried that people might try to come over. But, being unable to remember hurt, and Banri completely refused to tell his mother. He didn't want them to come and meet him. He didn't want to make contact with them. He didn't even consider getting his cell phone repaired, so he would be found by those from before. And then he left home, as if he were escaping.

I've died, he thought, and wanted to forget.

Being lost, for the second time and knowing there was something big he could not get back, was scary.

Setting the self he had never known aside, he picked up an album from where it was stashed in the cardboard box.

He wasn't perfect--- something large had been broken in him. That sort of thing was hard to

accept. For the moment perhaps, he couldn't do anything.

But, he wanted to change.

Being rejected hurts. Not being accepted hurts. Looking at pain directly hurts. By the recognition of that pain, first of all, accept the way you are now, he thought.

Even though he'd not been required to in the time he'd lost, if anything was accomplished by the birth of this self, he wanted to make that time important. That is to say, you cannot help but do it. So he thought.

From now on, if he met somebody, even somebody he'd met in the past, even himself, whomever it might be, he did not want to reject them.

For that reason, he opened the album. He needed just a little bit of courage. When first he opened the album cover, a strange, light sound came out.

"...Whaa..."

When he immediately saw his own face in it's proper place in the picture, a smiling class portrait, he gasped a little. Third year, class 4, Tada Banri. Tenth in the line.

He traced his fingertip slowly over his unknown self, and his unknown classmates' faces. He still had a feeling of dread towards what he had felt, but could no longer recall. He suppressed those feelings; he wanted to know who they were. He wanted to become able to.

But, his heart was beating fast.

To the front and down the line from the unknown Tada Banri, the person photographed giving a peace sign. The fifteenth person in the line.

Hayashida Nana.

"...Eh?"

From inside the album, a bunch of Polaroid photos had slipped out. Picking them up, he examined them. Quite a few of them were scribbled on, in bold letters. On one, in a different handwriting, "Banri's an idiot, nearly", was written. The two in the picture were messing around, looking at each other cross-eyed. "You've forgotten even your graduation!!!", was scribbled around the picture's edge.

"Linda passed on to college, Banri got held back.", was all else that was written.

There were pictures of just the two of them. In the classroom, in the gymnasium, on the grounds, in clubrooms, in uniform, in jerseys, smiling widely, even the fillings in their teeth showing, and a long wooden bridge.

Smiling, cheek to cheek.

"...Wh, what...? What the heck...? ...Linda-senpai...?"

Remember, don't forget!

Did Linda say something like that?

He stood up.

His socks slipping on the flooring as he took off running from his room,

"Banri!? Isn't your ramen boiling!? Where're you going!?"

"Hold on! Hold on, lemme see..."

As he pulled on his shoes, what he understood,

"To the bridge!"

The bridge wasn't very far from the house. Not entirely understanding yet, he searched for something as he ran. Just what he was looking for still didn't yet know. "Still, if I don't go...", he thought. He ran and he looked. If there was something he had to do there, something he had to get, whatever it was he wanted it. It struck him that he wanted nothing but to do that.

There was a paved path from amongst the mountains, so you could ride down. At such times he thought, "I've gotta get a scooter license, I really do." As he was passing by, he saw to the side a red banner on which was written, "The Entrance for the Seven Gods of Good Luck."

Before long, the long, long bridge came into view before him.

"...What, how ridiculous...!?"

It hurt to breathe. Gasping, he started to cross the bridge. This was the bridge from which Banri fell. What on earth happened at that time, nobody knows. Since the Banri in question had forgotten, and not even the police really knew.

"...Linda-senpai... How could it be...!?"

Show me, please, he muttered. Why, were you next to me? You, who are you? To me, what, what are you? Why don't you talk with me any more?

Passing the midpoint of the bridge, suddenly his feet stopped. Exhausted, he began to collapse.

"...What is this weird sound...!?"

Oddly cloying, the suggestive feeling brought by the ringing of the bell echoed unexpectedly

amongst the mountains. Iya~~~~n, boka~~~n, ufu~~~~n, with such a mood. The ringing of the bell--- who did it?

Dizziness took him to his knees. He clung to the guardrail. So as not to look down, he closed his eyes. It might have been a hangover. Unable to stand up, Banri covered his face with his hand. Dizzily, his feet shook. No, was it the bridge that was shaking?

It was at that moment.

While the idiotic bell was sounding, on this bridge, he realized he was hearing the sound of many feet running towards him.

Reflexively he looked up, and then, he saw a bunch of people passing by. He saw the form of the lead runner. The guy saw him too. He was looking fixedly at Banri's face, his jaw slack, looking like a fool.

That guy---

"Banri!"

Is that me?

Calling his name, grabbing him by the elbow, was that Linda?

What, what's this? What the heck is going on? To resist the dizziness, as if his brain were being spun around, he bit his lip. Mumbling, he felt thick-headed and slow, as if he were anemic.

Opening his eyes once more, it was just the bridge still, continuing on. There was nobody else. He couldn't hear the bell anymore. ...Was it a dream, maybe? Was it an aftereffect of his accident? Was his head somehow going funny? Or was it simply from his hangover? Or, was he just misinterpreting something he had seen?

Coming back to his senses, in his back pocket his cell phone was vibrating.

'Banri?'

"*Yana*-ssan..."

'What's with you, where are you? Out? Something I, today in some free time... I mean, I'd like to talk a bit. About yesterday, various things... could we do that?'

"...I'm... not here..."

"Huh? What? I can't hear you very well."

A dying cherry tree by a dry river bed, a big sky. The voices of friends. A long bridge. A strong

breeze. Other than Banri, there was no one else on the bridge.

Only Banri stood there now, alone, standing still amongst the scenery. In the middle of reality, existing. The ramen was boiling, his mother was getting frustrated, in such a moment he existed.

If he were able to recognize it as it was, he could perhaps forever be at peace.

* * *

Tada Banri was looking at Linda.

The sports science lecture suddenly getting cancelled, amongst the students hurriedly breaking up, he spotted Linda's form. Linda noticed Banri's gaze too, and waved, "See you, Tada Banri." While Banri gazed at that face, he could not move. There was so much he wanted to ask her. But he could not. Not knowing her reason for keeping the secret, he didn't know what he did and didn't know. Wanting to ask her, "What? Do you have something?", Banri kept on looking at Linda's face still.

A beautiful girl, her long beautiful hair carefully done, was looking at the back of Banri's head. Her name is Kaga Kouko.

At Kouko's profile, with a complicated look, but hiding so as not to be discovered, a slightly sunburnt guy was watching. His name is Yanagisawa Mitsuo.

Behind Mitsuo, having noticed earlier where he was looking, a girl was thinking about whether or not to call out to him. Her name is Oka Chinami.

Though the familiar faces were present, though he had not taken sports science, another guy had come into the classroom. His name was Satou Takaya.

Passing through the background, like a dark shadow there was a woman. Her name, of course, is NANA.

My name is Tada Banri.

I've died, an eighteen year old boy.

Unnoticed by anyone, without anybody knowing, I've always watched after Tada Banri's affairs. I see everybody's affairs.

I'm sitting in the first seat behind, taking it easy, legs stretched out. Today the sunlight is really strong, and the classroom is warm, making everybody sleepy. While staring at the boring back of

Banri's head, I find my eyes are closing by themselves. I'm getting awfully sleepy.

For now --- black-out.

The End

Postscript

This is Tokyo. Right now, it’s the end of August. This is a coffee shop. It’s just past ten in the morning. Outside it is already a world of intense heat.

Leaving the house triply armored against ultraviolet rays with a hat, a parasol and sun block, I was walking down the street, passing in front of an elementary school, when the kids, on summer break, shouting "Pyaaa!", "Kyoo!" and such, went running past me one by one, leaving slow me behind in their dust.

"Is there a pool near here? Are they that wound up already?", I thought, in aunt mode watching attentively before me, the kids running while tearing off their clothing. Wellll, for a moment I began to get impatient.

Of course, they were wearing swimsuits underneath, and they had taken off their shoes too, everyone in the stampede around the school gate was barefoot. In the schoolyard a bunch of adults looking like teachers were lying in wait for the kids, hoses in their hands. They aimed the hoses upwards, opened them fully, and started spraying the kids. Tossing nearby the clothes they’d taken off, the kids were already screaming in excitement. All of them, acting like little wild beasts. With the sheet of spray they’d made a rainbow. Stopping automatically, I gazed on the sight.

Because already... come now.

The smell of chlorine was rising, the humidity too, the cheers also, and the scorching sun...!

From the bottom of my heart, really, it was all mixed together...!

This slow person shamefully wanted to throw off her UV-armor and join the uproar, being splashed in fresh water wearing only one set of underwear! I mean, maybe even my panties have gone transparent! Bravely throwing off my clothes, with my body still fresh as a newborn, a frolicking sopping wet 32-year old Yuyuko! Such a super crazy spectacle it would have been, but with heart! The heart of a child! So it's OK then! Okaaay then!

...But isn't that wrong!?

Wouldn't I be arrested!?

Isn't it so...!?

Well then, as it happens, I cannot really get away with such matters of undressing, having a body way too overripe, and once more, to all of you I would like to express my humblest thanks.

I have given into your hands 'Golden Time'.

You have stayed with me all the way to the postscript.

I truly thank you, very much! With this new work, I've been looking forward to your reactions very much, even with awful, awful fear. A little, but wasn't it a fun time we've passed through?

As we moved ahead with the story, we said that our protagonists left Shizuoka to live in Tokyo. Those are only place names... "Shizuoka", "Tokyo" and the rest, officially, they are fictional towns. The real places are a little different, so please accept the mixture in the world of the written text. The erotic-sounding bell actually sounds normal, and to cross the bridge you pay a small toll. Even with regards to the college, there is no particular concrete model for it.

And now the next volume. We are preparing to deliver it to you around next spring. ...Now, don't give me those dirty looks, but, that's about as fast as I can do! I'm full of energy! I plan to keep working hard on my writing! At the very least, the spirit is willing! I will continue somehow; there is no better happiness for me than your interest. Please treat us well.

...Well then, right now it's really bright outside, and 104 degrees.

These few days, the sun has been blazing like this all the time. It's really hot, to the point of heat exhaustion. Yesterday was hot too, without thinking from 11:30 on I had a yakiniku lunch, but (My hat is anti-heat-fatigue. Just meat with a lot of rice is my normal serving. My appetite isn't there.) (And then, I got here a bit early, since it gets crowded by noontime. Making the most of my status as "self employed professional", and my sly knack for time management--- The Lunchbreak Shift (a.k.a. Escape from Employment)), for some reason my chopsticks are shaking, wobbling from side to side in my field of vision.

Look, and you would see an older woman you don't know, her mouth stuffed full of meat. ...Ah but you'd be wrong, it'd be me... the reflection of my figure dominates the mirror, doesn't it? The reflection is my profile. In which, what you see wobbling in that mirror are my jaws, you see, hardly chubby at all, alluringly shiny, furthermore, there's even more reflected in the mirror: the scenery behind me.

You know what I mean...?

To put it simply, my face has been disguised by optical camouflage equipment.

"...That so?~", I only nodded. While I'm eating meat, "That so? That so?~" "That one over there~, the girl past thirty being disguised by optical camouflage~" "All of you~, can you see~?" "Over here!~" "She's ... right ... here!" ...My life is a mess. Already, it really is a mess. Any time now I will be a complete wreck...

Nonetheless, one way or another I live, disappearing from this world through optical camouflage. The next volume of the story is taking shape, for certain. We want to deliver it to your waiting

hands as soon as possible! That's our plan.

Having said all that, you have stuck with me to the end. Once more, thank you very much. Please be kind to the second volume when it comes out! What would make me happier than anything else, if it's something you feel like doing, then by all means, please let me know what you think about it. Even if it's something brief, even if only one word! Of course, even if it's only a quick drawing!

And now to my illustrator, Komatsu Eeji, and my editor, I ask their patience as I continue working towards the next volume. Like a bunch of kids I don't know, suffering from the heat, let's run as fast as we can!

Takemiya Yuyuko

Translator's Notes

"wa" - "re"

↕わ (wa) and れ (re) look similar in Japanese.

Yanagisawa Mitsuo

↕Banri and Mitsuo are explaining which Japanese characters make up their names. This was translated as reciting a phrase that describes the meaning behind their full names. Tada Banri is 多 = Ta (many), 田 = Ta (rice field, the t changes to d in this combination), 万 = Man (Ten thousand or myriads), 里 = Ri (either an old unit of area, or village). Yanagisawa Mitsuo is 柳 = Yanagi (Willow Tree), 沢 = Sawa (Marsh), 光 = Hikari (Light), 弘 = Hiroshi (Center). The last two symbols, taken together, wind up being pronounced Mitsuo.

Escalator

↕ Refers to the "escalator"/"elevator" system, in which graduates from a high school attached to a university can enter it without admission exam.

Don Doko Don

↕Banri's mind is going ballistic here, and suddenly he's thinking in terms of a video game, Don Doko Don. The first phrase is actually a sound effect, referencing the name of the video game. The second refers to a kind of high jump.

Ham Man

↕ハムオ (Ham Man) is a catch phrase coined by Tetsuya Bessho, the actor in a CM for Marudai Shokuhin, a company mainly selling ham and sausages. The CM featured Tetsuya holding a huge box of ham, thus the resemblance to Yanagisawa with the huge bouquet of roses.

Aunt Squad

↕(Reference from Toradora Spin-Off 2). The author is having a little bit of fun here. Referring to the group of older ladies crowding about and constantly chattering, she uses the words おばさん軍団 (obasan gundan). Obasan is the usual term for your aunt, or for any older female person you may encounter. This usage is identical to how the word "tía" is used in Spanish. Gundan is the word for a small military unit, like a patrol or squad, though it could be used for an army too.

This bit is also found on page 38 of the first volume of "Golden Time". The only difference there is that instead of obasan, we find obachan, apparently treating the women a little nicer: grown (but not old) women, rather than the (apparently) older ones we see in this story.

Whether the author made this distinction consciously is a nice question.

Hayashida

↕The kanji '林' (forest) in '林田' (forest rice paddy) can be read two ways: Hayashi (Kun reading), and Rin (On reading), so her name can be read both as Hayashida and Rinda (Linda), what is to the Japanese a foreign name.

Satou-san

↕ Sato Foods Co. is a company specializing on cooked rice. One of their products, called Satou's meal (サトウのごはん) has gained popularity mainly among people living alone or without any children, because it can be prepared easily and fast.

Crabs

↕The type of crab was named: Floral Egg Crab. The species is very poisonous, and there is no known antidote.

Ruu Ooshiba

↕ Ruu Ooshiba (ルー大柴) is a Japanese actor and comedian, famous for mixing *many, many many manyyy* English words into his speech.

Omaken

↕ Omaken (おまけん) is an abbreviation from おまつり文化研究会 (Omatsuri Bunka Kenkyuukai), or "Festival Research Club".

Naki Sumo

↕ Every year in the Sensouji Temple, in Tokyo, there is a baby-crying festival held. Babies are brought there by their parents to be scared into crying by amateur sumo wrestlers, two at a time with a judge watching and scoring. The baby who cries longest and loudest wins. The parents believe this strengthens the babies and wards off evil spirits.

'Re'

↕ The "syllable" repeatedly refered to here is a single Japanese character, 'ㇾ', which is a syllable-like sound 're' or 'le', because of how the 'r' letter in Japanese is a sort of mix between the English 'r' and 'l' characters. In any case, the author is playing here, and the 're' words used are: レンコン (renkon: lotus root), レモン (remon: lemon), レンタル (rentaru: rental), 連獅子 (renjishi: a kubuki dance) and レンジ (renji: range/microwave). I took some liberties in the translation here in order to (sort of) preserve the word play.